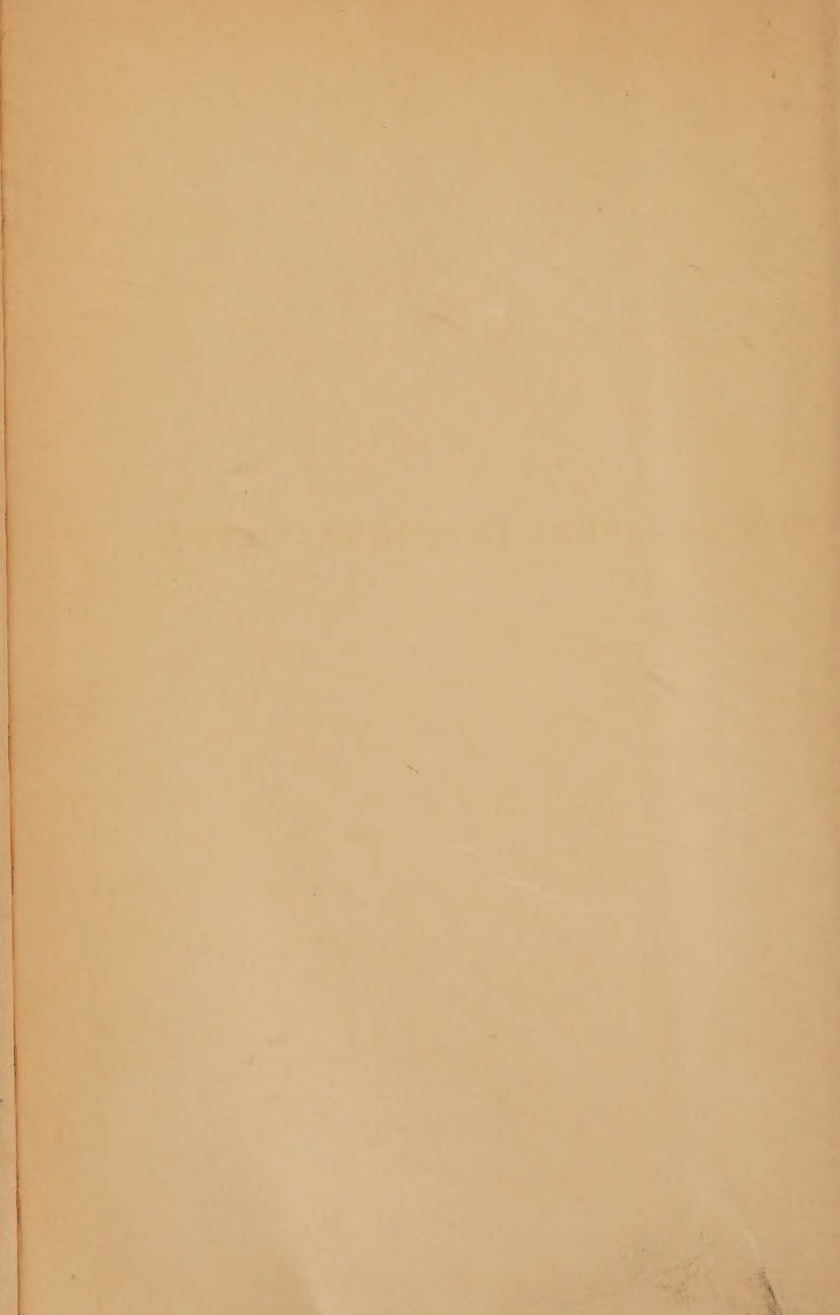


THE TREASURE OF THE BUCOLEON

ARTHUR D. HOWDEN SMITH



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BY
ARTHUR D. HOWDEN SMITH

Author of "THE DOOM TRAIL" "BEYOND
THE SUNSET," etc.



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To
JACK NASH

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The Treasure of the Bucoleon

CHAPTER I

THE CABLE FROM HUGH'S UNCLE

THE messenger was peering at the card above the push-button beside the apartment entrance as I came up the stairs.

"Chesby?" he said laconically, extending a pink envelope.

"He lives here," I answered. "I'll sign for it."

The boy clumped off downstairs, and I let myself in, never dreaming that I held the key to destiny in my hand—or, rather, in the pink envelope.

A samovar was bubbling in the studio, and my cousin Betty King hailed me from the couch on which she sat between her father and Hugh.

"Here you are at last," she cried. "Dad and I have come to say good-by to you."

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Can't you stand Hugh any longer?"

Hugh glowered at me.

"Always raggin'," he commented.

Betty laughed.

"We are going to Constantinople to hunt for Greek manuscripts."

"I have a theory," explained my uncle, Vernon King, "that the upheavals of the war and the occupation of the city by Christian garrisons should be productive of rich opportunities for bibliophiles like myself, aside from an enhanced chance for archæological research."

"Well, I wish you luck," I grumbled. "And I wish I was not tied down to an architect's drawing-board."

"'Matter of fact, I'm about fed up with Wall Street," growled Hugh. "Nobody can make money any more."

"It's very funny," remarked Betty. "Both you and Jack announced when you settled down after the war, Hugh, that nothing could ever root you up again. All you wanted, you said, was a good job and plenty of hard work."

"I know it," admitted Hugh. "I remember Nash, here, and Nikka Zaranko—"

"You mean the famous Gypsy violinist?" interrupted my uncle, who, I ought to say, uses the millions he receives from his oil-holdings to patronize the arts and sciences.

"Yes, sir. He was in the Foreign Legion durin' the war. We all met in the last big push in Flanders. I went in with my battalion to help out Jack's crowd, and was snowed under with them. Then Nikka tried to extricate both outfits, and the upshot was the Aussies finally turned the trick. Some show!

"Well, we three became pals. What I was going to say was that the last time we got together before demobilization we agreed we never wanted to feel the threat of danger again. We wanted to become rich and prosperous and fat and contented. That was why I came over to New York with Jack, instead of staying home and fighting with my uncle."

"That reminds me," I said, extending the pink envelope. "Here's a cable for you. Maybe—"

"If it's from Uncle James I shall be surprised," replied Hugh, ripping open the envelope. "A line once in six months is his idea of avuncular correspondence. Hullo!"

He pursed his lips in a prolonged whistle.

"Anything wrong?" asked Betty anxiously.

"No—well—humph! It's hard to say. Listen to this: 'Sailing *Aquitania* to-day due New York eighteenth must see you immediately have made important discovery your

aid essential family fortunes involved this confidential."

"Yes, on second thought, it is wrong, all wrong. He's after that treasure again. Oh, lord! I did my best to persuade him to be sensible before I left England with Jack."

"A treasure!" exclaimed Betty. "But you never told *me* about it!"

"Oh, it's a long story," protested Hugh. "Frightfully boring. It's a sort of family curse—like leprosy or housemaid's knee. It's supposed to be located in Constantinople, and my uncle has spent his life and most of the family's property trying to find it. That's why I have to make money in New York instead of playing the country gentleman. There was little enough in the family treasury before Uncle James reached it. Now— Well, the new Lord, who will probably be me, will find trouble paying the Herald's fees, let alone succession duties."

"You really are too exasperating," declared Betty. "A treasure story is never boring."

"I am on Betty's side," said her father.

My uncle Vernon is a very decent sort, despite the fact that he is a millionaire. He is a professor several times over, and hates the title. And he is one of the few learned men I know who can be genuinely interested in low-brow diversions.

"So am I," I said, backing him up. "You have been guilty of secrecy with your friends, which is an English vice I thought I had broken you of, Hugh. Come clean!"

"But there's so little to tell," he said. "I had an ancestor about seven hundred years ago, who is generally called Hugh the First. This Hugh was son to Lord James, who went to the Crusades and was a famous character in his time. On his way to Palestine, the stories say, James stayed a while with the Emperor Andronicus, who ruled in the Eastern Empire—"

"Ah, yes," interrupted King eagerly, "would that have

been Andronicus Comnenus, sometimes called The Butcher?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Very interesting," nodded King. "Andronicus amassed a great wealth through fines and exactions from the nobles, so the contemporary chronicles tell us."

"And this treasure is supposed to be in Constantinople!" exploded Betty. "Where we are going! Isn't that so, Hugh?"

"Yes, it is always located in Constantinople," answered Hugh. "In fact, it is generally referred to as the Treasure of the Bucoleon, which, I understand from Uncle James and other authorities of my university days, was the principal palace of the Eastern Emperors."

"Quite right," agreed Vernon King, his scholar's interest whipped aflame. "It was a magnificent residence, vying with the Palace of the Cæsars in Rome. In reality, in light of modern antiquarian research, we may describe it as a group of noble structures, standing isolated from the city within a spacious park, surrounded by an independent series of fortifications and with its own naval harbor on the Bosphorus."

"An extensive area to hunt over for an apocryphal treasure," remarked Hugh drily.

"You may well say so," endorsed my uncle. "I have been in Constantinople for extended periods upon several occasions, and I have never satisfied myself as to the existence at this time of any bone fide portions of the Bucoleon, although it is difficult to pronounce definitely on this point. The older portions of the city, especially those most massively constructed, have been so over-built since the Turkish conquest that frequently what is ostensibly a relatively modern building turns out to be almost unbelievably ancient at the core. But the prejudices of the Turks and their distaste for foreign—"

Betty, chewing her finger with impatience, waved to her father to be silent.

"Daddy!" she exclaimed. "Really, you aren't lecturing, you know! Do let Hugh get on with the treasure."

"But I'm afraid I've gotten as far as I can," replied Hugh. "The tradition simply says that Andronicus confided the secret of the location of the treasure to Lord James. Then Andronicus was assassinated, and James was thrown into prison by his successor. Hugh, James's son, went to Constantinople with an army of Latin Crusaders who had decided that the best way to help the Holy Land was to establish a friendly base there. They conquered the city—"

"A remarkable venture," corroborated my uncle. "The ease with which they secured possession of a city of one million inhabitants, not to speak of an extensive empire, is a clear indication of the degeneracy—"

Betty clapped her hand over his mouth.

"Do get on, Hugh!" she begged. "The treasure! You're almost as long-winded as Dad."

We all laughed, and yet, indefinitely, she had communicated to each of us something of the magic spell which is conveyed by any hint of treasure hidden in the past. We savored the heady wine of danger. I felt my right palm itching for the corrugated rubber butt of an automatic. When Hugh continued his story we all leaned forward, flushed and tense.

"The Crusaders captured the city, and Hugh rescued his father. Then they returned to England. Before James died he passed on the secret of the treasure to Hugh. There are documents in the Charter Chest—"

"What's that?" demanded Betty.

"It's a terribly old oaken box, bound with copper and steel," explained Hugh. "We keep it in a safe deposit vault in the City—London, you know. These documents say that James's idea was to have the treasure used for the rehabilitation of Christendom if any cause arose which would justify such a gift. Failing that, the money was to go to his descendants. But for many generations the

Lords of Chesby were too busy to hunt treasure so far from home.

"One Lord tried for it in Harry the Fifth's time, but the Greeks watched him so closely that he thought himself lucky to escape from Constantinople with his life. Then the Turks captured the city, and after that it was too risky—except for one chap in Elizabeth's reign. He was Lord James, the sixteenth baron, a shipmate of Raleigh and Drake and Hawkins, and he feared nothing that lived. He put in at Constantinople and bearded the Grand Turk in his lair. But even he did not venture to make a genuine search in view of the conditions that prevailed. From his time on few of the family bothered with the tradition until Uncle James commenced to mortgage farms to finance his researches."

"Then you have no definite knowledge of the location of the treasure?" asked King. "No chart or—"

Hugh laughed bitterly.

"No, sir, that is just why I feel so peevish over the way Uncle James has devastated the estate. It's a search for a needle in a haystack—and a needle that in all probability never existed, at that."

"I fear so," assented King, shaking his head.

"Nonsense!" said Betty. "It's as good a treasure story as I ever read. Why shouldn't it be true? Could you imagine a more perfect place for concealing a treasure all these centuries than Constantinople?"

"Your father will tell you," retorted Hugh scornfully, "that there is not a famous ruin in the Near East but is declared to contain a treasure of one kind or another."

"True—only too true!" agreed King.

"The sole use of the legend so far," continued Hugh unhappily, "has been to give Uncle James something to do. It must be a godsend to Curzon in managing the House, for during the war while Uncle James was shut up in England he was continually moving for the appointment of committees to preserve the monumental brasses

of country churches and appealing to the government to recognize that England owed a duty to civilization in retaining and Christianizing Constantinople—so he could dig to his heart's content for the treasure."

"Well, I for one intend to believe in it," stated Betty, "and if your uncle wants any help in hunting for it, he can count on me."

"We'll all help him, if it comes to that," I said. "Nikka Zaranko would never forgive us if we left him out of such a party."

"Uncle James will have nothing tangible to go on," said Hugh. "You can stake your last shilling on that. He's never had a sane idea yet."

"I take it, then," remarked Betty, rising with a detached air, "that you have no desire to go to Constantinople."

Betty is slim, with brown hair and eyes and a face that you have to look at and when she sets her head back—But of course I am only her cousin. Hugh jumped up, nervously crunching the cable in his hand.

"If I only do get a decent excuse to go to Constantinople!" he exclaimed. "But there's no use. I won't, Bet. I couldn't honestly encourage Uncle James in any more foolishness."

"Perhaps," suggested King, "his visit has nothing to do with the treasure."

Hugh chuckled, his merry self again.

"Cross the Atlantic just to look me up? Not a chance, sir. His ruling passion is driving him on. Confound it, though! I wish this hadn't come up. And I wish I didn't crave adventure again. And I wish you weren't going to Constantinople. All right! Laugh, Jack, curse you! Laugh! Here, I'll scrag you with a couch-pillow!"

"Easy! Easy!" I pleaded. "For the furniture's sake! How about giving the Kings a line to Nikka in Paris or wherever he is?"

"Thanks," said Betty, "but we're going via the Mediter-

annean. The best thing for you boys to do is to pack up with Hugh's uncle, collect your friend Nikka en route and follow on."

"No go," answered Hugh dismally. "All I am scheduled for is a fat family row."

CHAPTER II

THE BROKEN MESSAGE

THE steamship company telephoned while Hugh and I were at breakfast to say that the *Aquitania* was just docking. When we reached the pier West Street was swarming with out-going automobiles loaded with the first contingents of debarking passengers. We pushed our way upstairs into the landing-shed, surrendered our passes and dived into the swirling vortex of harried travelers, hysterical relatives and impassive Customs officials.

The Purser's office in the Main Saloon was vacant, but Hugh buttonholed a passing steward.

"Lord Chesby, sir? Yes, sir, he was one of the first ashore. There was a gentleman to meet him, I think, sir."

"That's queer," muttered Hugh as we returned to the gangway.

"Our best bet is to go straight to the C space in the Customs lines," I said.

"But who could meet him besides us?" objected Hugh.

"It's damned queer," I agreed. "What does your uncle look like?"

"He's small, stocky, not fat. Must be around sixty," said Hugh vaguely.

We surveyed the space under the letter C, where porters were dumping trunks and bags and passengers were arguing with the inspectors.

"No, he's not here," said Hugh. "Wait, though, there's Watkins!"

"Who's Watkins?" I asked, boring a passage beside him through the crowd.

“He’s Uncle James’s man.”

Watkins was the replica of Hugh’s description of his uncle. He was a chunky, solid sort of man, with the masklike face of the trained English servant. He was clean-shaven, and dressed neatly in a dark suit and felt hat. When we came upon him he was sitting forlornly on a pile of baggage, watching the confusion around him with a disapproving eye.

“Hullo, Watty?” Hugh greeted him. “Where’s my uncle?”

The valet’s features lighted up, and he scrambled to his feet.

“Ah, Mister Hugh! I’m very glad to see you, sir, if I may say so. ’Is ludship, sir? Why, ’e went off with your messenger, sir.”

“My messenger?” Hugh repeated blankly.

“Yes, sir, the dark gentleman. Your man, ’e said ’e was, sir.”

“My man!” Hugh appealed to me. “Did you hear that, Jack?”

Watkins became suddenly anxious.

“There’s nothing wrong, I ’ope, sir? The gentleman came aboard to find us, and told ’is ludship how you’d been delayed, and ’e was to come along to your rooms, sir, whilst I saw the luggage through the Customs. Wasn’t that right, sir?”

Hugh sat down on a trunk.

“It’s right enough, Watty,” he groaned, “except that I never sent such a message and I haven’t a man.”

“What sort of fellow was this messenger?” I asked.

Watkins turned to me, a look of bewilderment in his face.

“An Eastern-looking gentleman, ’e was, sir, like the Gypsies ’is ludship occasionally ’as down to Chesby. Strange, I thought it, sir, Mister Hugh, that you should be ’aving a gentleman like that to valet you—but as I

said to 'is ludship, likely it's not easy to find servants in America."

"How long ago did Uncle James leave, Watty?" asked Hugh.

"Nearly an hour, sir."

"Time enough for him to have reached the apartment. Jack, do you mind telephoning on the off-chance? I'll fetch an inspector to go over this stuff."

I had no difficulty in getting the apartment. The cleaning woman who "did" for us answered. No, nobody had called, and there had been no telephone messages. I hastened back to the C space with a sense of ugly forebodings. Hugh I found colloquing with Watkins, while two Customs men opened the pile of Lord Chesby's baggage.

"Do you know, Jack," said Hugh seriously, "I am beginning to think that something sinister may have happened? Watty tells me that he and Uncle James are just come from Constantinople. He says my uncle went there convinced that he had discovered the key to the treasure's hiding-place, but in some unexplained way Uncle James was deterred from carrying out his plans, and they returned hurriedly to England."

"And now I think of it, sir," amended Watkins, "we 'ave been shadowed ever since we went to Turkey. I never paid much attention to them, considering it was coincidence like, but its been one dark gentleman after another—at the Pera Palace Hotel in Constantinople, on the Orient Express, in London when we called on 'is ludship's solicitors—"

"What was that for?" interrupted Hugh—and to me: "Uncle James hated business. He couldn't be brought to any kind of business interview unless he had a pressing motive."

"Why, sir, Mister Hugh, I don't know rightly—least-ways, 'twas after 'is conversation with Mr. Bellowes 'e sent the cablegram to you, sir. And 'e 'ad the Charter

Chest sent up from the safe deposit vaults—but that was before we went to Turkey, to be sure, sir.”

“It was, eh?” Hugh was all interest. “How was that?”

“Why, sir, ’e rang for me one day at Chesby, and ’e was rubbin’ ’is ’ands together like he does when ’e’s pleased, and ’e said: ‘Watkins, pack the small wardrobe and the portmanteau. We’re goin’ to run down to Constantinople.’ ‘Yes, sir,’ I said, ‘and do we go direct to Dover?’ ‘No,’ ’e said, ‘we’ll go up to London. Wire Mr. Bellows to ’ave the Charter Chest sent up from the bank. I must ’ave another look at it—’ ’e was talkin’ to himself like, sir—‘I wonder if the hint might not ’ave been in the Instructions, after all.’ ”

Hugh jumped.

“By Jove, he has been after the treasure! The Instructions is the original parchment on which Hugh the First inscribed his command to his son to go after the treasure—carefully leaving out, however, the directions for finding it. And what happened then, Watty?”

“Why, sir, we went up to London, and Mr. Bellows, ’e tried to persuade ’is ludship not to go. They were together ’alf the morning, and when they came from the private office I ’eard Mr. Bellows say: ‘I’m afraid I can’t follow your ludship. There’s not a word in the Instructions or any of the other documents to shed a ray of light on the matter.’ ‘That’s what I wished to make sure of, Bellows,’ said ’is ludship, with a chuckle.”

“Cryptic, to put it mildly,” barked Hugh. “Dammit, I knew the old boy was up to some foolishness. ‘If he’s taken on some giddy crew of crooks for a piratical venture—’ ”

“He wouldn’t have called on you for help,” I cut him off.

“True,” assented Hugh. “But I wish I could take some stock in the nonsense at the bottom of it.”

“I wonder!” I said. “I’m drifting to Betty’s belief

that there is more in the treasure story than you think."

"It's bunk, I tell you," said Hugh, thoroughly disgusted. "Well, the Customs men are through. Watty, collect some porters, and get this baggage down to the taxi stand."

The cleaning-woman was still in the apartment when we returned, and she reiterated her assertion that nobody had called. We had some lunch, and then, on Watkins's suggestion, I rang up hotels for two hours—without any result. At the end of my tether I hung up the receiver and joined Hugh in gloomy reflection on the couch. Watkins hovered disconsolately in the adjoining dining room.

"There's one thing more to do," said Hugh suddenly. "Telephone the police."

"That would involve publicity," I pointed out.

"It can't be helped."

The telephone jangled harshly as he spoke, and I unhooked the receiver. Hugh started to his feet. Watkins entered noiselessly.

"Is this Mr. Chesby's apartment?" The voice that burred in my ear was strangely thick, with a guttural intonation. "Tell him they are taking what's left of his uncle to Bellevue. It's his own fault the old fool got it. And you can tell his nephew we will feed him a dose of the same medicine if he doesn't come across."

Brr-rring!

"Wait! Wait!" I gasped into the mouthpiece. "Who—"

"Number, please," said a stilted feminine voice.

"My God!" I cried. "Hugh, they've killed him, I think."

Hugh's face went white as I repeated the message. Watkins' eyes popped from his head.

"Where is this hospital?" stammered Hugh.

"Over on the East Side."

"We must catch a taxi. Hurry!"

Watkins came with us without bidding. In the taxi none of us spoke. We were all dazed. Things had hap-

pened too rapidly for comprehension. We could scarcely realize that we were confronting stark tragedy. As we turned into East Twenty-sixth Street and the portals of the huge, red-brick group of buildings loomed ahead of us, Hugh exclaimed fiercely:

“It may not be true! I believe it was a lie!”

But it was not a lie, as we soon learned in the office to which we were ushered by a white-uniformed orderly. Yes, the nurse on duty told us, an ambulance had brought in an elderly man such as Hugh described within the half-hour. The orderly would show us the ward.

We traversed a maze of passages to a curtained doorway where a young surgeon, immaculate in white, awaited us.

“You want to see the old man who has been stabbed?” he said.

Hugh gripped my arm.

“Stabbed! Is he—”

The surgeon nodded.

“Yes. He must have made a hell of a fight. He’s all slashed up—too old to stand the shock.”

Watkins caught his breath sharply.

“Of course, he may not be your man,” the surgeon added soothingly. “This way.”

He led us into a long room lined with beds. A high screen had been reared around one of them, and he drew it aside and motioned for us to enter. An older surgeon stood by the head of the narrow bed with a hypodermic needle in his hand. Opposite him kneeled a nurse. Two bulky men in plainclothes, obvious policemen, stood at the foot.

And against the pillow lay a head that might have been Hugh’s, frosted and lined by the years. The gray hair grew in the same even way as Hugh’s. The hawk-nose, the deep-set eyes, the stubborn jaw, the close-clipped mustache, the small ears, were all the same. As we entered, the eyes flashed open an instant, then closed.

“Uncle James!”

“ ’Is ludship! Oh, Gawd!”

The policemen and the nurse eyed us curiously, but the surgeon by the bed kept his attention concentrated on the wan cheeks of the inert figure, fingers pressing lightly on the pulse of a hand that lay outside the sheets. Swiftly he stooped, with a low ejaculation to the nurse. She swabbed the figure’s arm with a dab of cotton, and the needle was driven home.

“Caught him up in time,” remarked the surgeon impartially. “Best leave him while it acts.”

He turned to us.

“I take it you recognize him, gentlemen.”

“He is my uncle,” answered Hugh dully.

“Ah! I fancy you will be able to secure a few words with him after the strychnia has taken hold, but he is slipping fast.”

One of the policemen stepped forward.

“I am from the Detective Bureau,” he said. “Do you know how this happened?”

“We know nothing,” returned Hugh. “He landed from the *Aquitania* this morning. We were late in reaching the pier. When we reached it—”

Some instinct prompted me to step on Hugh’s foot. He understood, hesitated and shrugged his shoulders.

“—he was gone, ostensibly to seek my apartment.”

“Name?” asked the detective, thumbing a notebook.

“His? Chesby. It is mine, too.”

“Initials?”

“His full name is James Hubert Chetwynd Crankhaugh Chesby.”

“English?”

“Yes.”

“Business or profession?”

“Well, I don’t know how to answer that question. He is a scholar—and then he’s a member of the House of Lords.”

A subtle change swept over the faces of the policemen. They became absurdly deferential. Their interest, which

had been perfunctory, grew intent. The surgeons and the nurse, hardened to such deathbed scenes, responded also to the element of drama which Hugh's words had injected into the drab story.

"Gee-roosalum!" exclaimed the policeman. "This begins to look big. Who could have wanted to bump off a guy like him? Was he—a gay sorter old boy, eh?"

"Positively, no. He was the last man to suspect of anything like that. He has been a traveler and student all his life."

"What was his specialty?"

"Gypsy dialects and history, and the ancient history of Constantinople."

"Gypsies, eh?" The detective was all alert. "He was picked up corner of Thirteenth Street and Avenue C. There's a plenty of Gypsy dumps in that neighborhood. A man and three women saw him dropped from a closed auto. The Gyps are a bad people to get down on you, clannish as hell and awful suspicious. It may be this here Lord Chesby crossed some family of 'em in his studying and they went out to knife him."

"It may be," agreed Hugh, "but I haven't a thing to back up the assertion with."

"Well, we'll start to work on that clue anyhow."

The detective stepped around the screen, and Hugh touched the senior surgeon on the arm.

"How long?"

"Probably only a few minutes."

As he spoke, the deep-sunk eyes flickered open, surveyed us almost quizzically one by one.

Hugh bent forward, Watkins beside him.

"Do you know me, Uncle James?"

The lips parted, framed words that were barely audible.

"Good lad! Where's—Watkins?"

"'Ere, your ludship," volunteered the valet, with a gulp.

“Send—others—”

Hugh looked up to the senior surgeon.

“Do you mind, sir?”

“Not at all. Just a moment, though.”

He stooped to feel the pulse, reached for the needle and shot in a second injection. Its effect was instantaneous. The dying man’s eyes brightened; a very faint tinge of color glowed in his ashen face.

“I’m afraid that second shot will hasten the end,” the surgeon muttered to me, “but it will give the poor old fellow more strength while he lasts. Make the most of your opportunity.”

He shepherded his assistants outside the screen, and Hugh pulled me to my knees beside him.

“This is Jack Nash, Uncle James,” he said, speaking slowly and distinctly. “He is my friend—your friend. He will be with me in whatever I have to do for you.”

Lord Chesby’s eyes, a clear gray they were, examined me closely.

“Looks—right.” The syllables trickled almost soundless from his lips. “It’s—treasure—Hugh.” His eyes burned momentarily with triumph. “Know—where—”

“But who stabbed you?”

I have often wondered what would have happened if Hugh had let him talk on of the treasure, instead of switching the subject.

“Toutou,” answered the dying man, with sudden strength. “Tiger—that chap—others—against—him.”

“But why? Why did he do it?”

Once more the smile of triumph in the eyes.

“Wouldn’t—tell—him—treasure—said—torture—broke—away—Gypsies—”

Exhaustion overcame him. His eyes closed.

“Is he going?” I murmured.

Hugh crouched lower and held his watch-case to the blue lips. A mist clouded the polished surface.

"Give him time," he said. "Watty, who is Toutou?"

"Never 'eard of 'im, sir. Oh, Mister Hugh, sir, is 'is ludship—"

The gray eyes opened; the lips began to move.

"Watch—out—that—gang—desperate—be—after—you."

"But who are they, Uncle James?"

"Toutou—worst—Beran—many—bad—lot."

"Where did they take you? Tell us, and we shall have them arrested?"

The gray eyes glittered.

"No—no—lad—avoid—police—don't—talk—treasure—"

"Where is the treasure?" I interposed.

"Bull—cedars—li—"

His breathing dwindled to little, fluttering gasps, but he fought on.

"How did you find it, Uncle James?" asked Hugh softly.

That gay smile of triumph shone in his eyes for the last time.

"Used—my—brain—all—laughed—me—in—Hugh's—"

And the life flickered out of him as we watched.

Two big tears rolled down Watkins' cheeks.

"'E was a good master. Oh, Mister Hugh, sir, I do hope we can punish those bloody villains!"

"We will," said Hugh coldly, rising to his feet. "For the time being, Watkins, remember to keep your mouth shut about all this. Uncle James was right about the police. They can't help us in such a matter. If there is anything in the treasure story we should wreck any chance of finding it by advertising our purpose."

"The less said the better," I agreed. "If the police ask us, he rambled at the end about Gypsies and family affairs."

There were several details to be settled with the hos-

pital authorities. The British Consulate had to be notified. Reporters had to be seen. It was early evening when the three of us returned to the apartment in West Eleventh Street, and the newsboys were yelling an extra.

“English nobleman murdered on the East Side! Horrible death of Lord Chesby!”

I bought a copy, and we read it as we walked down Fifth Avenue:

“‘One of the strangest murder mysteries in the criminal annals of New York has been presented to the police for solution through the death in Bellevue Hospital this afternoon of James Hubert Chetwynd Crankhaugh Chesby, twenty-ninth Baron Chesby in the Peerage of Great Britain, thirty-fifth Lord of the Manor of Chesby and Hereditary Ranger of Crowden Forest.

“‘After landing from the Cunarder *Aquitania* this morning, Lord Chesby, a dignified, scholarly man of fifty-eight, was lured away from the pier into the purlieus of the East Side, where, apparently after a valiant fight for life, he was set upon and hacked with knives. His body, still living, was left by an automobile—”

“Skip it,” ordered Hugh impatiently. “What do they say of the object of the crime?”

“‘From the fact that Lord Chesby has made a lifelong study of Gypsy lore and dialects,’ I read on, ‘the police suspect that some criminal of these nomad tribes may have slain the distinguished nobleman, either for personal gain or vengeance. Lord Chesby’s nephew and heir, the Hon. Hugh James Ronald Howard Chesby, who is a Wall Street bond-broker, received a telephone message during the afternoon, notifying him of his uncle’s fate and warning him that the same end would be his if he made any attempt to run down the assassins.

“‘The new Lord Chesby when interviewed at—’”

“I don’t like it,” interrupted Hugh again, frowning, “but it will have to stand. Uncle James wanted it that

way, and his word is law. It will do no good to add to the story. The police can't help us. We are playing a lone hand. All rules are off."

"A lone hand?" I repeated. "Does that mean that Nikka is out of it? Remember, we agreed after the Armistice that if we ever did forsake the fleshpots for the call of danger it would be together."

"I hate to drag him away from his concerts," answered Hugh, considering. "He's makin' pots of money. But if there's a Gypsy angle to this he'd be priceless to us."

"And he'd never forgive us if we left him out," I added.

"I suppose he wouldn't. Tell you what, we'll cable him to meet us in London at my solicitors' office. We've got a long way to go, Jack. We don't even know who we have to fight. As for the treasure—Well, I want to talk to Bellows first and have a look at the Charter Chest."

CHAPTER III

THE PAPERS IN THE CHARTER CHEST

AT Liverpool we wired to Hugh's solicitors for an appointment that afternoon and dispatched Watkins direct to Chesby with the body of his late master. We arrived at Victoria about four o'clock, and took a taxi to the offices of Courtenay, Bellows, Manson and Courtenay in a smutted old building in Fleet Street over against the Law Courts.

Up two flights of stairs we climbed to a dirty door with the firm-name straggling across it. A clerk stepped forward as we entered, but before he could speak a brown figure shot out of an inner office, and wrapped Hugh and me in a jovial hug. It was Nikka, thinner than we remembered him, but with the same steady eyes and quiet smile. He was abashed by his own enthusiasm and started to apologize.

"I am so glad to see you two," he said, "that I forget it is a time of sadness. Yet even so it means gladness for me that I see my friends again."

"It's gladness for all of us," returned Hugh, wringing his hand, with its delicate, sinewy fingers.

"It means something like the old life once more," I added. "That is, if you can come, Nikka."

"I'll come," he said simply. "For two years I have been faithful to my fiddle. Now, I think, it is time I had a rest."

An elderly gentleman, with gray hair and precise features, emerged from the inner offices and bowed deferentially to Hugh.

"I trust your lordship is in good health. If you remember—"

"Of course, Mr. Bellowes," assented Hugh. "I remember you very well. This is my friend, Mr. Nash. Mr. Zaranko, I take it, you already know. Are you at liberty?"

"Surely, sir. I expected you. This way, please."

And he ushered us into a room where chairs were clustered about a square table on which reposed a huge, steel-bound box of very heavy, dark oak. Mr. Bellowes waved his hand toward the box.

"I trust I anticipated your lordship's wishes. I directed the bank to send up the Charter Chest this afternoon."

"Quite right," said Hugh, "it will simplify our task. Did my uncle leave any will?"

A shadow settled upon Mr. Bellowes' lined face.

"There was no need, your lordship. The estate is entailed. The Shipping Bonds, your grandmother's dower, went before the war. The mining shares all have been sold, as well as several smaller blocks of securities. Aside from some insurance accruing from your uncle's demise, there is practically nothing—oh, a few government bonds of the war issues, to be sure—outside of the Chesby lands."

He wrung his hands nervously.

"Oh, Mister Hugh—I beg your pardon, your lordship—I don't know what we shall have to do. The death duties can scarcely be met. The insurance will help some, but I am afraid we must raise another mortgage at a ruinous rate or else move to break the entail and sell off some of the farms. I warned his late lordship again and again of the harm he was doing, but he would never listen to me."

"Poor Uncle James has paid a stiff price for his efforts," answered Hugh. "I can't find it in my heart to take exception to his extravagances after what happened in New York."

The old lawyer looked at us slyly.

"Just what did happen, if I may ask, sir? The reports in the press were—"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"He was murdered by a gang of criminals, who were trying to obtain from him information which he apparently believed furnished a clue to this treasure he had been searching for all his life," returned Hugh.

"Really, sir?" exclaimed Mr. Bellowes in surprise.

"Why did you suppose he was killed within a few hours of landing in a strange city?" countered Hugh.

The solicitor hesitated.

"If your lordship will permit me to speak quite frankly? Ah! Thank you, sir. I will say, then, that I had fancied I knew your uncle unusually well, and in light of that knowledge I would never have fancied him addicted to—er—" he coughed apologetically—"probably I need not say any more. But at any rate it will not be offensive if I add that in a long course of legal experience I have never heard of a man of his late lordship's position being murdered unless—unless there were circumstances of a character we may describe off-hand as unsavory."

There was a brief silence.

"I infer that is the general supposition?" asked Hugh, rousing himself.

"I fear it is, your lordship."

"And it is absolutely untrue!" exclaimed Hugh with energy. "I know that! Mr. Nash knows it! Watkins knows it!"

"Then why not make the facts known?" suggested Mr. Bellowes.

"If we did so, we should have a negligible chance of establishing our point, and we should certainly lose whatever slight chance there may be of finding the treasure. I am sure my uncle would have wished us to go after the treasure at any cost."

"The treasure!" Mr. Bellowes permitted himself a

faint smile of amusement. "Am I to understand that your lordship has succumbed to this fatal lure?"

"You may understand I am extremely interested in the possibility of finding it," retorted Hugh.

"Dear, dear!" murmured the aged solicitor, genuinely distressed. "Surely, you will listen to reason, sir. This *Fata Morgana*—if I may term it so—has exercised an evil influence upon your family time out of mind. Your uncle is one of a number of people whose lives have been cursed by its futile spell. I do hope you will permit me to urge you to abandon an attempt which must infallibly dissipate whatever is left of your estate."

"But you tell me that the estate is wrecked in any case," replied Hugh. "I do not blame you for one instant for being skeptical, Mr. Bellows. I felt so, myself, until recent events forced me to the conclusion that there may—notice, please, that I say may—be more to the matter than I had imagined.

"I am anxious to secure your advice, and therefore I propose that Mr. Nash and I recount for you and Mr. Zaranko precisely what happened in connection with my uncle's visit to New York."

So we began at the beginning, with the time I found the messenger boy studying the door-card of our apartment, and carried the tale through to Lord Chesby's death in Bellevue. Mr. Bellows was visibly shocked.

"I had not supposed such criminals existed any longer," he said. "However, let me draw to your attention the fact that these incidents happened in New York. They could never have happened in England."

"They might have happened anywhere," interjected Nikka, speaking for the first time.

We turned to him with startled interest. His face was very serious as he leaned forward over the table.

"In the first place," he continued, "consider this treasure. I have always heard of it as the Treasure of the

Bucoleon, but I believe it is also sometimes referred to as the Treasure of Andronicus."

"You mean to say, you, too, have heard of it?" exclaimed Mr. Bellows.

"Yes. It is well-known in the Near East. I am a Gypsy. My father before me was Voivode Tzaibidjo, or King, of the Balkan Gypsies. Many tales come to my ears, for, though my people are scattered far and wide and no longer make pretense of being a nation, they still honor those who have been their leaders. I have heard, for instance, a story that a certain tribe of Gypsies in Constantinople guard the supposed site of the treasure. But I do not vouch for the story.

"I do, however, vouch for the statement that Lord Chesby is confronting an organized international band of criminals with many Gypsy members; and I do not believe that such a band would waste time on any enterprise which they did not have good reason to believe would promise handsome profits."

"You mean to say that such a band could operate in England to-day?" demanded the old lawyer doubtfully.

"They can, and almost certainly they do. Crime has increased since the war, remember. The removal of national barriers and the unsettlement of conditions have stimulated it anew. I know something of this band. If it is the one I have heard of we are menaced by the most intelligent combination of thieves, murderers and outlaws that ever acted together."

"What do you know about them?" I asked.

"I have heard that they are doing a great deal of smuggling, and it is in this work that they use the Gypsies especially. I have heard, too, of this Toutou you speak of. He is usually called Toutou LaFitte, but he has many other names. He is said to be a combination of blood-thirsty monster and intensely clever strategist. The band have ramifications in all classes of society, and there are

few countries they do not reach. I have no doubt, Hugh, they made arrangements in your uncle's case with some affiliated criminal organization in America."

"Where do you get all this information?" asked Hugh curiously.

"I am a Gypsy," answered Nikka. "We Gypsies are really a separate people, and I grieve to say our lower orders constitute a criminal class. As it happens, I am well-known to my people, and many of them come and tell me what they hear."

"Why don't you tell this to the police?" demanded Mr. Bellowes.

"What good would it do? The police would laugh at me—and I should be stabbed some dark night as I came from a concert. No, I can turn my knowledge to better use by aiding Lord Chesby in his quest."

"It's blame lucky we have Nikka to help us!" I exclaimed. "And I'd like to ask him for his candid opinion on the treasure business."

"I don't know," said Nikka slowly. "I should not like to raise Hugh's hopes, but—Put it this way. I should not be surprised if it is true. Before we go any farther, let us ascertain the facts we have to go upon."

"That is my idea," agreed Hugh. "Mr. Bellowes, I gathered from Watkins that my uncle discussed his discovery with you. Did he indicate precisely what it was or where he had found it?"

Mr. Bellowes joined his fingers tip to tip with meticulous precision. A thoughtful expression possessed his face.

"I might as well admit," he began, "that you have shaken my judgments in the matter. The circumstances narrated are extraordinary. I am not prepared to endorse your conclusions, yet—Well, that is by the way, your lordship."

"Watkins is correct in his supposition. Your uncle did discuss his—ah—fancied discovery with me. Aside from the fact that he had made it whilst at Chesby—"

“At Chesby?” Hugh interrupted.

“So I understood. He came in to see me just before he started for Constantinople the last time. I should describe him as considerably excited. ‘By Jove, Bellows,’ he said, ‘do you know, I’ve found the missing part of the Instructions?’ I remember I pooh-poohed his claim, and instead of becoming angry, as he usually did, he laughed at me. ‘Oh, you may doubt,’ he said, ‘but I am going to Constantinople, and I shall soon know whether I am correct or not.’

“‘You have been to Constantinople before,’ I told him, ‘but you never obtained any information.’ ‘I lacked the key,’ was his answer. ‘To think that all these years nobody ever found it!’ I ventured to remind him of a mortgage coming due, which could be extended only at an increased rate, and he replied: ‘We’ll attend to that without any difficulty. I tell you, Bellows, it’s all perfectly plain in the missing half of the Instructions.’ Then he had me get out the Charter Chest, saying he wished to go over the known half of the Instructions to see if there had not been a hint of the hiding-place in that or any of the other old documents.”

“Was there?” questioned Hugh.

“If there was, he did not tell me, your lordship. He went away without any comment, and the next I saw of him was perhaps three weeks later when he returned from Constantinople. He was even more excited than he had been when he came up from Chesby. ‘I really think there’s something in it,’ he said. ‘I wish you’d have one of your young men send this cable to my nephew. I am going to need some young blood in this. It’s there, Bellows, I am persuaded, but we shall have to figure carefully on getting it out.’”

“Humph,” said Hugh. “That’s not much to go on. Do you know what he did with the missing half of the Instructions he said he found?”

“No, sir. He never showed it to me, and so far as I

know, he did not have it in his possession when he was here."

"He wouldn't have carried it, or even a copy of it, if he had supposed others had an interest in it," I interposed.

"True," assented Hugh. "Well, let's have a look at the Charter Chest."

Mr. Bellows went to a safe in the corner, and took from an inner compartment a bunch of heavy keys, some of them comparatively modern, others clumsy and ancient. With these he opened lock after lock along front and sides of the old chest. Hugh and I carefully raised the lid. A musty odor floated up to us, such an odor as you find in old books. The chest, itself, was packed with smaller boxes, some of wood and some of iron and steel.

The aged solicitor indicated a massive steel box in one corner.

"That contains the Instructions and related documents, your lordship," he said, and lifting it to the table top, fitted a small key to the lock.

There was a click, and the cover flew back. Inside was a wooden lid, which Hugh pried up with his thumb-nail, and below that a layer of oiled silk, and below that again more layers of cloth, silk and linen. Finally, we came to several framed parchments, with glasses in front and back.

"Your uncle did that," explained Mr. Bellows. "He was afraid they would be ruined by handling and exposure."

The first frame contained a sheet of parchment, I should say, twelve inches by ten, covered with minute Black Letter script in a rather corrupt form of mediæval Latin.

"That is Hugh's Instructions," said the solicitor. "I'd advise you not to strain your eyes trying to make out the original. We had a very careful translation prepared, and checked over by scholars at Oxford."

He drew out a typewritten sheet of foolscap, and Nikka and I read it over Hugh's shoulder:

[illegible]

"INSTRUCTIONS of Hugh, Lord of Chesby. I, Hugh, write this for my son, and it may be, those who come after him.

"In the reign of the Emperor Andronicus Comnenus my father visited Constantinople, and the Emperor made much of him. At the Emperor's request my father aided in the disposition of a certain treasure which Andronicus had amassed by confiscating and fining the estates of rebel nobles. None save these two knew the location of the treasure.

"It chanced that my father passed oversea to the Holy Land to make good his vows to Our Lady the Virgin, and the Emperor Andronicus was slain by his enemies. The Emperor Isaac, who succeeded Andronicus, sent urgent messages to my father, bidding him visit Constantinople that the new Emperor might do him honor. And in time my father journeyed again to Constantinople, and the Emperor would have had him yield the secret of the treasure. But my father would not, because Andronicus had obtained from him a solemn oath never to give up the treasure to any save one who would spend it for the bettering of the Empire, and the new Emperor craved it for his courtiers and courtesans. Then the Emperor threw my father into prison, and so kept him until Messer Baldwin of Flanders and Messer Dandolo of Venice and the barons of the Crusade went against the Emperor and smote him down.

"Ill-fortune continued to beset the Empire, and so my father kept the secret. In God's appointed time he died and passed on the secret to me. Now, I, too, see Death riding toward me, nor do I fear it, for those I love are in the Shadow Worlds of Hell or Purgatory.

"Harken, then, my son, and those of your seed who come after us. The Lords of Constantinople are rotten. Their Empire dwindles away. The treasure is not for such as they. Therefore I say it shall go to augment the fortunes of our house and recompense my father's sufferings.

"Take it, he who can. But beware the Greeks, for some know of the treasure and the secret will not die.

"In Manus Tuas, Domine."

Hugh let fall the typed script, and we all stared reverently at the original parchment under its sheltering glass. There was something inexpressibly poignant about these

words carried across the ages from a Norman-English baron to his modern descendant.

"Is there anything else?" asked Hugh. "It's odd, he speaks so impressively of going after the treasure, and yet he offers no hint of how to find it. Was the secret always unknown? But no, of course not! There was that chap in Henry the Fifth's time, and the Elizabethan Hugh. They knew where it was."

"There is another document here which sheds light upon that phase of the mystery," volunteered Mr. Bellowes, and he sorted an envelope from the mass of documents in the steel box.

From the envelope he drew a heavy sheet of yellowed linen paper inscribed in an angular feminine hand in very faded black ink.

"This was written by the widow of the Elizabethan Hugh," the old solicitor continued. "Her husband, as you may remember, my lord, never returned from one of his voyages. His lady seems to have been a strong-minded person, after the fashion of her royal mistress, indeed. She was in charge of the estate for some years in the minority of her son, and she evidently used her authority."

He spread the paper before us. It was dated "Castle Chesby, ye 5th Septr., 1592," and we read the vigorous strokes with ease:

"Forasmuch as yt hath pleased God to sette mee in authoritie in this my deere late Husband's place, I have seene fitte to Take that Roote of Evill which hath beene ye bane of Oure race Fromme oute ye Chartar Chestre and putte yt where yt may Wreak noe more Of harmme and Sorrowe. I will not have my Sonne awasting of Hys substaunce and hys Life as didde Hys deere Fathour.

"JANE CHESBY.

"Postscriptum. Yette will I leave a trase for Thatte yt might seeme Unfaithfull to ye Dead didde I lose thatte whych ys a part of ye House's wealthe."

"What do you make out of that?" I asked in bewilderment.

Hugh and Mr. Bellowes laughed.

"I remember hearing of this, but I never saw it before," said Hugh. "Jane Chesby was a character, by all accounts."

"The tradition," said the solicitor, "is that the 'Roote of Evill' was the part of the Instructions containing the directions to the location of the treasure. At any rate, there is no record of its having been seen since the date of Lady Jane's minute."

"But the 'trase' she speaks of?" I queried.

"Nobody has ever found it—unless Lord James did so."

"What is that on the back of the paper?" Nikka asked.

"The lady seems also to have been a poetess," said Mr. Bellowes with a smile. "They are some lines she scrawled, apparently without any reference to the matter on the other side."

Nikka turned the paper over. The lines were scrawled, as the lawyer had said, diagonally across the sheet, as if in a moment of abstraction:

**Putte downe ye Anciount riddel
In Decente, Seemelie ordour.
Rouse, O ye mystic Sybil,
Vex hymme who doth Endeavour,
Nor treatte hys efortte tendour.**

"A farrago of antique spelling and nonsense," commented Hugh. "That gets us no farther."

"Still, I suggest we take a copy of it with us," said Nikka.

"It won't do any harm," agreed Mr. Bellowes, and he called a stenographer and directed him to make copies of the two writings.

"This Lady Jane was a ferocious Protestant," pursued

Hugh reflectively. "It was she who blocked up the old family crypt, saying it was not fit to bury Protestant Chesbys with the Papist lords in a place that had known the rites of the Scarlet Woman and all that sort of stuff."

"Yes," said Mr. Bellowes, turning from the stenographer, "and if you recall, my lord, she blocked up the crypt so successfully that its exact location has been a mystery ever since." And to us he explained: "It lies somewhere under the extensive ruins of Crowden Priory, an old monastic establishment which was closely linked with Chesby in the Middle Ages."

Hugh rose reluctantly.

"I am afraid we have learned nothing here," he said. "Have we exhausted the Charter Chest?"

"Unless you wish to read the brief records of the Elizabethan Hugh and his ancestor of Henry the Fifth's time," replied the lawyer. "Neither furnishes any concrete information. The one records the suspicion and hampering of the Greeks; the other was never allowed about except under escort of Janissaries."

"Then we have done all we can," said Hugh. "We'll take the night train for Chesby."

Mr. Bellowes suspended his work of returning the several documents to their places in the steel box.

"I do hope you will take thought to whatever you do, your lordship," he urged. "As you see, the trail so far is blind, and whatever validity we may attach to your uncle's assertion that he had discovered the clue, it must be manifest that you are helpless until you have learned as much as he did."

"You are quite right," returned Hugh, somewhat to the old gentleman's surprise. "But we intend to find out what my uncle discovered. If he did not overrate his achievement, then you may be sure that we shall do everything in our power to obtain the treasure."

"You must admit that common sense can dictate no other

course. You say I am ruined as it is. Well, then, I can well afford to risk whatever is left on the chance of extricating the estate."

The lawyer wagged his gray head sorrowfully.

"It's a very sad situation for me, Mister Hugh—beg pardon, your lordship," he sighed. "One way, as you say, it's ruin, to put the facts bluntly. The other way, there'll be terrible danger. Well, sir, I wish you and your friends the best of luck, and whatever poor service I can afford you you may rely upon."

CHAPTER IV

THE GUNROOM AT CASTLE CHESBY

THE inimitable Watkins met us at Chesby station with a motor in which we were whirled off through mirky woods and a half-seen park to a low, rambling building of varying architecture set on the summit of a saddle-back hill. Lights showed in one wing, but the center and other wing were dark.

"I'm very sorry, your ludship," apologized Watkins, as he assisted us from the car in front of a Tudor archway. "It's been some years since the 'ouse has been opened. Your uncle, 'e was used to living 'ere in the Old Wing, and we're under-staffed, if I may say so, your ludship, for—"

"It suits me, Watty," returned Hugh. "My friends are not company, and of course, we shall not entertain. It would be foolish to open up the entire place."

He stood on the doorstep, glancing around him at the thick, ivy-draped walls and the machicolated parapets which lined the roofs.

"Welcome to Chesby, you chaps," he hailed us. "It gives me a thrill to come here. I haven't seen it since before the war, except for one brief visit two years ago, and I haven't really lived here since I was a lad."

A butler no less dignified than Watkins held the door open for us, and a palsied footman strove with the valet for custody of our scanty baggage. Watkins motioned both aside when we entered the high-pitched hall.

"This way, if you please, your ludship and gentlemen," he said. "I 'ave 'ad supper served in the Gunroom. 'Is late ludship used it as a snugger, as 'e called it, Mister Hugh—beg pardon, sir, your ludship—and far more

cheery it is, sir, with a bright fire and all, than the other rooms."

"That's fine," approved Hugh, and he led us after Watkins through a short passage to the right and into a big room, with mullioned windows, deeply-embrasured, and carved oaken rafters and stone walls showing above the rich paneling that rose a tall man's height from the floor. At one side was a vast fireplace, with chimney-piece, ingle-nooks and over-mantle elaborately carved. A log-fire blazed on the dogs, and before it, warmly illuminated, a table was set with snowy linen and silver emblazoned with the Chesby crest, a mailed arm clutching a dagger and beneath it an open eye, with the motto "I search."

Hugh rubbed his hands with satisfaction.

"This is home," he said.

But a shadow instantly chased the smile from his lips.

"And if Bellows is correct, it will continue to be my home only if we succeed in finding something lost more than seven hundred years ago," he added.

"If it is to be found we shall find it," answered Nikka. "What a beautiful room!"

"I was going to say the same thing," I said. "As an architect, I have tried to achieve this effect for rich Americans, but I must admit I can't do with mere money what time and many men's imaginations have accomplished here."

"And women's imaginations, too," replied Hugh. "This is the oldest part of the castle, but it has felt the influence of that redoubtable Lady Jane you heard about this afternoon. I believe this wing is supposed to be the remains of the Angevin keep and Great Hall of the first Hugh's castle, which were partially destroyed in the Wars of the Roses, and again by fire in Bloody Mary's time. Lady Jane rebuilt this wing and joined it with what was then the modern, and early Tudor, central mass."

Curious, I stepped over to the fireplace and examined the splendid carvings in deep relief that adorned stone and woodwork. High up near the roof on the overmantel I discerned the family crest, together with numerous heraldic shields in colors faded and dimmed. But the most curious feature of the ornamentation was a lower panel supported by a group of bibulous monks in comically disordered attitudes. On the panel appeared to be lettering.

"Watkins," I called, "bring me a candle, please."

He lifted a weighty candelabra from the table and carried it toward me, Hugh and Nikka trailing him like small boys eager to view anything new. As he held it aloft, arm-high, the soft light shone on four lines of Gothic lettering which had once been gilded. They showed clearly in the age-old oak of the paneling:

**Whenne thatte ye Pappist Churchmanne
Woudde seke Hys Soul's contente
Hee tookeened up ye Wysshinge Stone
And trodde ye Prior's Vent.**

"I had forgotten that," exclaimed Hugh. "It's some more of Lady Jane's poetry."

"She seems to have been rather hipped that way," I suggested.

"Now you speak of it, I can't recall any other specimens of her wit in rhyme," answered Hugh, puzzled. "Can you, Watty?"

"No, your ludship. 'Is ludship, your late uncle, made a careful examination of Lady Jane's papers, but 'e found no other verses."

"But what was her idea here?" I persisted, for the whimsicalness of the thing interested me.

"Oh, as I told you, she was virulently anti-Catholic," said Hugh carelessly. "It was she, you know, who sealed

up the old family crypt and built a new one in the Priory, as the parish church is called. She probably believed that the former monks of the Priory had been more interested in their wine-cellar than in masses."

"But the 'Prior's Vent'? What on earth is that?"

"I don't know, unless it was the way to the wine-cellar. Don't you see the point?"

"No, I don't. And this 'Wysshinge Stone,' too? What could that be?"

"It must have been something connected with entering the wine-cellar. Oh, it's all perfectly simple, Jack. Crowden Priory was one of those establishments guilty of abuses which furnished Henry the Eighth with his excuse for looting the monastic orders. The facts were still a matter of memory in Lady Jane's time, and she took advantage of them to mock the Catholics. That's all."

I did not answer him for I had become engrossed in the decorations of the stone mantel, itself, a magnificent piece of freestone, sculptured in a frieze of Turks' heads, sphinxes and veiled women, ranged alternately.

"Well, she—or her masons, I should say—did a fine job," I said at last, tearing myself reluctantly from the beautiful courses of stone and the even flags of the hearth.

"You'll have plenty of time to indulge your architect's eye hereabouts," declared Hugh from the table. "Come and eat or Nikka will leave you nothing. Watty, what is the news?"

The valet deposited a chafing dish and stand by my place.

"Mr. Penfellow, the Vicar, your ludship, instructed me to tell you the service for 'is late ludship would be to-morrow morning, as you requested. 'E had made all arrangements consequent upon receiving your ludship's cablegram. Oh, yes, sir, and Mr. Hilyer was over from Little Depping this afternoon in a motor—with some ladies, sir—and asked after you. 'E said 'e would be at the funeral, sir."

Hugh frowned.

"I will not have anything to do with that bounder," he grunted.

"'E 'as quite a lively time, so the servants tell me, your ludship," volunteered Watkins. "A regular 'ouse-party 'e's entertaining now, with foreign gentry and all."

"They would be foreign," retorted Hugh. "He can't get a decent Englishman inside his house, and if he thinks I shall fall for him just because I've spent two years in America—" he broke into a sudden grin—"It's rather funny, Jack. I expect he believes I've been metamorphosed into a bloomin' democrat. The bounder!"

"What's the matter with the man?" inquired Nikka.

"Everything! The Hilyers own the next place to us—Little Depping, it's called. They were always decent enough people, but this chap, Montey Hilyer, is a wrong 'un. He got into trouble before the War with the Stewards of the Jockey Club and was barred from the course. Then he picked up a reputation as a card-sharp and society gambler. For a while he used to hang around Continental resorts and fleece the innocent.

"When the War came he enlisted, made a splendid record and earned a commission. The next thing that happened was a scandal in his mess over heavy play, and he was compelled to resign. He's a bad egg, through and through. Odd, though, how he keeps up Little Depping. I believe he's been on short rations more than once, but he always has managed to preserve the estate—and like me, he's the last of the line."

Watkins removed the savory, and received a platter of sandwiches from the butler, who he permitted to come no farther than the door.

"And your ludship may remember Mr. Hilyer married some years ago—before 'e got into trouble, sir," he observed as he placed the platter before us. "She was, if I may say so, your ludship, not one of us."

Watkins contrived to express deep disapprobation, with-

out wrinkling or contorting his countenance, a trick at which I always marveled.

"Quite so," assented Hugh. "She was an actress or something like that. Well, it's in the beggar's favor that he married her. But they can't come footling around here. I'd have the whole County up in arms against me."

We chatted on for a while, and then Watkins guided us to the upper story where three adjoining bedrooms had been made ready.

"The bathroom is across the 'all, sir," he informed me, stopping at my door on his way from Hugh's room. "My room is beside it. You 'ave only to ring, sir, if you wish anything. Good night, sir."

As he left, I reflected with a grin that I had not been so coddled since my schooldays as in the brief period following his adoption of Hugh and myself. For that was what it amounted to. For all his deference and servility, neither Hugh nor I would have dared to withstand any wish which Watkins gave serious expression to, and furthermore, he made us feel constantly that we were obligated to maintain a certain standard of conduct, which he, Watkins, might find satisfaction in.

I was up early the next morning, and a brief scouting tour revealed Nikka's room empty, while Hugh snoozed blissfully on. So I shaved and bathed, and descended the broad, shallow staircase into the entrance hall below. This wing, I noted, seemed to be shut off entirely from the remainder of the house. At any rate, there were no open corridors.

Watkins was arranging flowers in a luster bowl on a table under an oriel window, and I mentioned this fact to him as I stood on the lowest step, drinking in the wonderful satisfaction of a perfectly designed and furnished entrance, something that it takes the average architect ten years to learn how to do.

"You are right, sir," he answered. "There are corridors, but they shut off, in order to save heat, sir, and

prevent draughts. Since the death of the old lord, sir—Mister Hugh's grandfather—we 'ave 'ad such a small family that no occasion was found for all the rooms. And the old wing, sir, is a large 'ouse by itself."

"Well, that makes so much less for us to defend," I said.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"In case our friends of Toutou's gang should try to attack us," I explained.

But Watkins was as positive as Mr. Bellows that such things could not transpire in England.

"Oh, sir, sure I am you need not concern yourself for that," he said seriously. "They would never dare. The constabulary, sir—and all that."

"Perhaps," I said. "What is that music?"

He inclined his ear towards the door of a room that opened from the opposite side of the hall to the Gun-room.

"Oh, sir. That's Mister Nikka. 'E's in the music room aplaying to 'imself, sir."

I crossed to the half-open door and peered inside. Nikka was sitting at a pianoforte in a flood of sunshine, and the music poured from his lips and fingers, like the sunshine, passionately intense, warm and vital. It stirred me as I listened, searching out primitive impulses, painting sound-pictures of outlandish scenes, spreading exotic odors over that conventional room. It was rebellious, uncivilized, untamed—and I liked it.

He crooned to himself, rather than sang, but the words and the melody, savage, melancholy, joyously-somber, beat their way into my brain:

Sad is the ache in my heart;
The cities crowd me in.
I may not breath for their stench,
My ears are deaf from their din.

Let me go forth from their ways,
Out where the road runs free,
Twisting over the Balkan hills
Down to the restless sea.

The dust shall caress my feet,
The sun shall warm my limbs,
The trees shall tell me their thoughts
At dusk as the twilight dims.

And I shall inhale the smoke
Of fires beside the road;
I shall hear the camels grunt
As the drivers shift their loads.

And best of all, I shall hear
The wild, mad Tzigane songs,
Cruel and gay and lustful,
Like fiddles and clanging gongs.

And in the glare of the campfires
I shall see the Tziganes dance—
Women with lithe, round bodies,
Men straight as a heiduck's lance.

And perhaps a wild brown maiden
Will seek me amongst the throng,
And dance with me down the twisting road
To a wild, mad Tzigane song.

He ended with a crashing of keys, and looked up to meet my fascinated gaze.

"You liked it?" he asked shyly. "I can see you did. It is a little song I have made out of the heart-beats of my people. We Gypsies can make music, if nothing else. And all Gypsy music should be played on strings. Only the fiddle can reach the heights and depths of human emotion.

But I have put my fiddle away from me until we have finished this job."

He walked over and slipped his arm through mine.

"Let us see what Watty has for breakfast," he went on, "and send him to awaken that lazy-bones, Hugh."

"But see here, Nikka," I broke in. "Are you really a Gypsy? In the usual sense of the word?"

He considered as he explored a fruit-dish.

"I don't know what you mean by 'the usual sense of the word,'" he answered finally. "I am a Gypsy by birth and blood. I passed my boyhood with the caravans. I learned to play the fiddle with the Gypsy maestros of Hungary."

"It's funny," I admitted, "but I never quite envisaged you as a Gypsy until I heard you sing that song."

Nikka smiled.

"I can understand that. I made up that song because I was feeling the lure of the blood. The Gypsy in me has been crying out for assertion. I think that is one reason why I was so glad to have Hugh call on me. I smelled in his need a chance to sample the old, wild life again."

"Do you believe the Gypsies play a part in this treasure business?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I feel it in my bones. It is a Gypsy tradition, remember. Probably we shall find the interest of some Tzigane tribe crossing our's."

"And then?"

"My tribe fight for Hugh."

"Your tribe?"

"Surely, I have a tribe. They fight for my hand and for my friends."

I regarded him with increased respect.

"That has a delightfully mediæval sound. It strikes me you are going to be the most valuable member of this expedition."

"All for one, and one for all," laughed Nikka.

He waved a greeting to Hugh, who came in at that moment.

"We are talking about Gypsies and fighting," he explained.

"And it seems that Nikka is a potentate who has a tribe to carry out his wishes," I amended.

"I wish we had his tribe here to help us pull down this old stone-box," answered Hugh gloomily. "How else are we going to uncover any hiding-places? And I feel like fighting when I remember that we are going to Uncle James's funeral this morning. Well, the best way to fight, I suppose, is to search. That's the family motto. Jack, you'll have a first rate opportunity to investigate early structural methods in English architecture. I expect you'll be the only one to get anything out of the affair."

Which last was a very poor piece of prophecy.

CHAPTER V

A BLIND ALLEY

MR. PENFELLOW, the Vicar received us at the west door of the parish church, a gigantic edifice which was all that was left of the once noble foundation of the Priory of St. Cuthbert of Crowden. With vergers and curate, both striving mightily to equal his solemn countenance, he escorted Hugh—and incidentally, Nikka and me—up the center aisle to a high-walled pew directly under the choir. Immediately behind us, Watkins was marshaling the slender array of servants from Castle Chesby, all of whom had come to pay the lost honors to their dead master.

The church was so large that the considerable congregation were swallowed up in its echoing nave. The transepts contained nothing save monuments and tombs. The tempered light that stole through stained-glass windows left most of the space in shadow, but I descried beyond the breadth of the crossing a second box-like pew identical with ours, and in it a company whose gay raiment and gabbling ways were out of place in contrast with the stolid piety of the village folk and neighboring gentry.

"There's Hilyer," muttered Hugh in my ear, as the vergers pompously presented his mace and the Vicar withdrew toward the altar.

But we had no time to spare for observing the county's black sheep. Mr. Penfellow's quavering, nasal voice began to intone the stately rite of the Established Church for the dead. The shrill voices of the choir-boys responded. Our eyes became fastened upon the oblong casket, resting

on its low catafalque under the choir railing, which contained the body of James Chesby, that quaint, whimsical, Twentieth Century knight errant, who had upheld the traditions of his race by tilting over the world in pursuit of a prize which all sober men proclaimed to be impossible of attainment.

And he had as good as found it! Laughed at, derided, mocked and ridiculed, he had persisted doggedly in what he had regarded as his life-work. He had succeeded where all others had failed or feared to venture. And at the last, probably when he envisaged complete success in his grasp, he had accepted death rather than yield the prize to any but his heir. He must have had good stuff in him, that slight, wan-faced slip of a man, whom I had only seen as he lay on his death-bed in the hospital, his eyes shining to the end with indomitable spirit.

As I thought of him, cut and hacked by that brute Toutou, I found my fingers clenching on the book-rack in front of me; and glancing down, I saw Hugh's knuckles, too, were white. We exchanged a grim glance. For the first time we understood fully that we were playing a man's game, a game in which there was no limit. And we experienced the thirst for action which comes from a desire to slake unsatisfied vengeance. This task we had set ourselves to was more than a hunt for treasure. It was likewise a pursuit of James Chesby's murderers.

Nikka must have read somewhat of our thoughts in our faces, for he reached behind me and slid a hand over Hugh's straining knuckles; and I saw that his lips were shut tight and his eyes blazing like coals under their eagle brows. And then my eyes chanced to stray toward the opposite side of the crossing, and in the shadows that hovered over the Hilyer pew I glimpsed a pair of eyes that gleamed with the evil green light of a beast of prey. For an instant only they showed. Then the shadows moved, and they disappeared. Startled, I looked again, and saw nothing. It must have been fancy, I told myself,

a trick of the sunbeams filtered through the particolored glass of the windows. And I turned my ear to the cadenced voice of the Vicar:

“Man, that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.”

The formal service was soon ended, and after the congregation had filed out, a little knot of men from Chesby farms poised the casket on their shoulders and paced slowly after Mr. Penfellow and the verger down the broad, winding stairs to the pillared crypt. At the east end, beneath the altar, the verger unlocked a massy oaken door and behind that an iron grate. There was a minute's delay while he lit tall candles, and then the little procession marched on into the last resting-place of the Chesbys.

It was an octagonal chamber, Tudor in style and extraordinarily spacious, the groined roof springing lightly from slender pillars. At the far end was a simple altar, and all around the other segments of the octagon were ledges in two tiers. At intervals over the floor space were tombs and sarcophagi. The flickering candles brought out an occasional inscription.

“Hugh James Cuthbert.....twenty-eighth Baron Chesby.”

“Claudia Anne, Lady Chesby, aetat 34, beloved..... James, twenty-first.....”

On several coffins reposing on the side ledges there were the moldering remnants of old flags. On one lay an officer's cocked hat and sword, tarnished and covered with dust.

Mr. Penfellow was bowing to Hugh.

“The—ah—space next your grandfather, I suppose?”

Hugh nodded dumbly, and the men carrying the casket shifted it gently into the niche adjoining the twenty-eighth

baron's. Once they had set it in place, we were at some difficulty to distinguish it from those above and on either side of it. They were all exactly alike. And how different, probably, had been the men and women they held!

Hugh stumbled forward, and knelt beneath his uncle's casket. Nikka, beside me, breathed hastily in my ear:

"I can't stand this, Jack. How can people be buried in stone vaults? I'm choking."

Without waiting for a reply, he slipped away between the pillars, and I was left alone with Mr. Penfellow. The verger was just shepherding the pall-bearers through the gate.

"A very sad chapter in the glorious history of this ancient family, Mr. Nash," murmured the vicar with moist eyes. "But surely no man could hope for a grander Valhalla."

He gestured toward the encircling tombs.

"All of the line since Elizabethan times. That is, all the lords and their ladies. Cadets and collaterals are buried elsewhere in the church. Have you heard the story of Lady Jane Chesby, the builder of this chamber? Ah! Very interesting, is it not? Her own husband was lost at sea, you know. But here is an empty tomb she reared to him."

He led me to the handsomest sarcophagus in the center of the chamber. On the marble lid was carved life-size the effigy of a man in half-armor, sea-boots and morion. In his hands, clasped upon his breast, he grasped a sextant.

The lettering of the inscription on the side I hastily deciphered as:

**"James Matthew Kymmer, Baron Chesby,
Hereditarie Rangare of Crowdene Woode,
Admirall of ye Queene's Gracious Majestie,**

Scourge of ye Spaniards and all Papists and Infidells, Lost at Sea, Anno apud. 1590."

And underneath this;

"Deere Lord, I, thatte was yr Bedfellowe, do reare thys thatte yf yt please Godde so to do and Hee bringe You to my Side there shal not Lacke a Space."

"The famous Lady Jane rests under the adjoining sarcophagus with the plain lid," continued the Vicar. "I wish we might find the old crypt. It is somewhere under the Priory grounds but she concealed it very effectually. The tradition is that the old lords were buried in their mail. They were all noted as warriors. Ah, Lord Chesby," as Hugh rose and walked over to us. "This has been very sad, very sad, indeed. And yet, as I was saying to Mr. Nash, it is something for a man after he dies to be brought back to wait the Last Trump in such glorious company."

"I am afraid I have been thinking of the criminals who murdered my uncle," said Hugh curtly. "You have been very kind, sir. I should like to thank you and everybody else for what they have done. Where's Nikka, Jack? Gone up? Do you mind if we leave you to shut the vault, Mr. Penfellow? Thank you again."

He hooked his arm in mine, and together we passed out of that sepulchral chamber, with its great company of illustrious dead. Upstairs in the church porch Nikka was awaiting us, breathing in deep gusts of the air that blew in tintured with the perfume of Crowden Forest that stretched all around the village.

"I'm sorry, Hugh," he exclaimed, taking Hugh's other arm, "I couldn't wait. There's something in me that rebels against your churches. I feel the same way about mosques and synagogues, for that matter. And as for be-

ing buried down in a close, stone-lined hole in the ground, herded in with other dead!" He shivered violently. "I hope not! If there is a God—and there must be some kind of one to make the trees and hills and the grass and to put music in one's heart—why, I pray to Him that I shall lie on a hillside, with only the trees around me and the sun beating down."

Hugh smiled.

"Each to his own, Nikka. You are a Gypsy, a son of the open road. I am an Englishman, son to these stone walls, that old house we came from. I cannot get away from it. I am bound up with them. So long as they and I last we shall be indivisible."

"And what am I?" I demanded lightly.

"You? You are an American. The world is your oyster. You can be satisfied in any way, in Nikka's way or in mine."

It was a scant ten minutes' walk through the park to Castle Chesby. As we entered the drive, Watkins, who had driven back with the servants, came around the house from the stables and started to run toward us.

"Somebody broke in whilst we were at church, your ludship," he panted when he was within earshot.

We were all startled.

"Anything missing?" questioned Hugh sharply.

"I can't say as yet, your ludship. They seem to 'ave been only in the unoccupied parts. I fancy, sir, they 'adn't the time to go through the West Wing."

We hastened into the house after him. A rear door in the center of the castle—it was really more of a manor than a castle in style—had been forced. Desks, wardrobes, chests of drawers, closets, armories, every corner or piece of furniture that might conceal anything had been thoroughly ransacked. Drawers and their contents were still piled helter-skelter on the floor.

"Do you suppose they could have found anything?" I asked.

Watkins shook his head positively.

"I am sure they could not, Mr. Nash, sir. I think I know most of the stuff that they have gone through. Oh, in a very general way, your ludship, to be sure. But I am sure 'is late ludship was not in the 'abit of keeping anything he was precious of in the East Wing or the Main 'Ouse, sir."

We left Watkins to supervise the servants in reëstablishing order in the upset rooms, and returned to the West Wing. In the Gunroom, Hugh lit a cigarette and straddled his legs in front of the fire. Nikka and I dropped into the lounge that faced the hearth.

"Well?" said Hugh, and his lips had resumed the grim line I had noticed in church.

"Who are they?" I suggested.

"Good idea," approved Hugh, and he rang the bell by the door.

Watkins arrived with the celerity of a djin.

"Watty, I wish you'd make inquiries along the roads, and find out if any strangers have been seen around the place this morning. Oh, yes, and tell the servants not to talk. You understand? Not to talk. The man or woman who talks is to be dismissed."

"That was another good idea," said Nikka. "Our best bet is to keep our mouths shut. They, whoever, *they* are, have us guessing. Maybe we can make them guess a little. And that reminds me, do you realize that they have saved us quite a bit of searching?"

"You mean in turning two-thirds of the house upside down?" answered Hugh.

"Just that. And I'd suggest that we waste no time in going thoroughly over this wing, ourselves."

We set to work with gusto. On my suggestion—they nominated me captain in this enterprise because of my supposed architectural knowledge—we commenced with the Gunroom. We examined it from end to end, tapped

the paneling for secret recesses, examined the furniture. No result.

After luncheon, we began on the upper floor and went over the entire wing in detail. We measured the different rooms. I even took outer measurements. We studied chimneys. We sounded floors. We took to pieces every article of furniture which might have concealed a secret drawer—and we found several hidden receptacles, by the way, but they contained nothing beyond ordinary family letters and trash. Immersed in the hunt and baffled by lack of success, we caused Watkins to put off dinner, and worked on until after nine o'clock. Still no success.

We went to bed that night, tired out and disgusted. But in the morning we arose with sharpened interest and determined to canvas the possibilities in the parts of the house the invaders had searched. Again we took careful measurements, inside and out. Again we sounded paneling, investigated recesses and chimney spaces. We hunted for two days. Then we went back, and reexamined the West Wing a second time. We ended up in stark disappointment in the Gunroom.

"Damn it all!" ripped Hugh. "The trouble is that my family were not Catholics in the times when priests were proscribed, and every self-respecting Catholic family had its Priest's Hole."

"I'm not worried just because your family can't boast an accessible hiding-place," I retorted. "What bothers me is that their hiding-place, if they have one, is so cunningly hidden that we can't find it."

"If they have one," repeated Hugh. "You may well say that! I am beginning to believe we may be on a wild goose chase, after all."

"If we were the only ones after it, I might think so," I replied.

Nikka, who had relapsed into one of his frequent spells

of silent contemplation, jumped suddenly from his chair.

"If it is here, it is in this room," he said.

"Is that a Gypsy prophecy?" jeered Hugh.

There was a racket of motors outside in the drive, and Watkins appeared in the doorway.

"Pardon, your ludship. But I thought you would wish to know Mr. Hilyer and 'is party 'ave just driven up."

"The devil they have!" exclaimed Hugh. "I suppose we'll have to see 'em."

But Watkins lingered in the doorway.

"What is it?"

Watkins cleared his throat.

"You may remember you instructed me to inquire if strangers 'ad been seen on the roads 'ereabouts the morning of the funeral, your ludship."

Hugh nodded.

"Mrs. Dobson at the Lodge said nobody passed on the village road, your ludship. And I made other inquiries, but without success until I met 'Iggins, the carpenter, sir, this morning. 'E said one of Mr. Hilyer's motors passed on the London road close on noon, but that was all."

"Well, that doesn't help any," said Hugh. "Whoever did it must have taken to the woods and cut across to the Channel road."

"They need only 'ave dropped over the park wall to reach the London Road, your ludship," suggested Watkins.

"Oh, I see your point," agreed Hugh. "Then Hilyer's people might have seen them. I'll find an opportunity to speak to him about it."

"Thank you, your ludship."

And Watkins withdrew.

CHAPTER VI

THE HILYER PARTY

“**M**R. and Mrs. Hilyer, your ludship!”
And never in my life have I seen anything more splendid than the emotionless disapproval with which Watkins was able to invest his countenance as he announced our callers.

Hilyer was a lean, rangy chap, with a hatchet face and close-set eyes. His mustache was waxed in the Continental fashion, and he had slim, powerful hands, the hands of a born horseman and gambler. He looked what he was: good blood gone wrong.

His wife was a handsome, statuesque woman, awfully well turned out. She was absolutely in the mode, as perfect as a show-girl in a Gayety production. And she had cold eyes that saw everything, and never lost their icy glitter even when her manner was warmest.

“Hullo, Hugh!” exclaimed Hilyer. “Frightfully glad to see you home again, but rotten sorry for the occasion. You don’t know Mrs. Hilyer, I believe.”

Hugh bowed to her with cold precision.

“Thanks, Hilyer—” just a shade of emphasis on the family name—“it was kind of you to come. We are keeping bachelors’ hall, Mrs. Hilyer, and I am afraid our entertaining resources are limited.”

“Don’t let that bother you,” protested Mrs. Hilyer affably, “and if you and your friends want any lively diversion on the quiet, remember we keep liberty hall over at Little Depping. We wanted our—”

But I lost the thread of her conversation as I found myself staring into those same evil green eyes that I had

seen peering out of the shadows of the Hilyer pew the morning of the funeral. The man they belonged to had entered the room immediately after the Hilyers. He would have challenged attention in any company with his amazing personality, the strange force that radiated from him. He had the long arms, short, thick legs and enormous body of a gorilla, capped by a beautifully-modeled head. His forehead was high; his clean-shaven face was very white; his jaw was square, without being prognathous. But his eyes were his outstanding feature. They were large and vividly green like a cat's.

The man baffled you. The expression of his face was dreamy, preoccupied. He had the appearance of a thinker, a recluse. But underneath his outward seeming I sensed another self, lurking as if in ambush. He was handsome in an intellectual way. Yet I found him repulsive.

Hilyer, undeterred by Hugh's frosty greeting, dropped his hand on this man's shoulder, and began introducing him. I noticed that the Englishman let his hand lie there only a minute, and then almost snatched it away.

"Signor Teodoreschi, gentlemen! The Italian chemist. And my other friends, Countess Sandra Vassilievna and Count Serge Vassilievich! I ought to explain they are brother and sister!"

This last with a well-bred leer.

"And Hilmi Bey, gentlemen! If you knew your Levant, you would recognize him without introduction."

I saw Nikka shift his attention at this from the two Russians to the Levantine, an olive-skinned individual, good-looking in a portly way, with a predatory beaked nose, effeminate eyes and a sensual mouth.

"You see we're rather an international crowd—what?" Mrs. Hilyer was drawling. "Matter of fact, Lord Chesby, we might muster another race or two."

"Very interesting, I'm sure," said Hugh, cold as ever. "You won't mind if I present my friends to you as a

group? Thanks. This is Mr. Zaranko—and Mr. Nash.”

“Not Mr. Nikka Zaranko?” exclaimed Mrs. Hilyer. “Oh, I say, it is a treat to meet you! How wonderfully you play!”

And she wrenched Nikka away from his obvious intent to probe the Levantine, and carried him off to a corner, along with Vassilievich, a slim-waisted, old-young man, with a hard, dissipated face. Hilmi, after a look around, joined the gorilla-like Italian, who was turning the pages of a review on the table, with occasional flashing glances about the room. Montey Hilyer was volubly describing the prospects of the racing season to Hugh, and I was left by process of elimination to entertain the Countess Sandra Vassilievna.

I think both Hugh and Nikka envied me the chance. She was a dark girl, with great, sleepy, almond-shaped eyes and a sinuous, willowy figure.

“You’re an American, aren’t you?” she said with a very slight accent. “How do you happen to know Lord Chesby?”

I explained to her.

“He went to New York to earn his living! Ah, that is an old story, Mr. Nash. Look at my brother and me! Exiles! Forced to turn our hands to whatever we can do. The Old World is a sad place these days.”

I felt like telling her that I didn’t believe it would hurt her sort to do a little work, but instead I asked her what she did do.

“Oh, anything,” she replied evasively. “Secretarial work when I can get it. And you? What shall you and your friends do now? But I suppose you will help Lord Chesby enjoy the life of an English country gentleman.”

“For a while, yes,” I agreed.

“And then?”

“I don’t know. America, I suppose. One must earn a living.”

“So you would leave him—Lord Chesby, I mean?”

I began to have a disagreeable feeling that I was being pumped.

"I can't stay here forever, you know," I retorted.

"Ah, but of course! And Lord Chesby? Will he marry an heiress, an American, perhaps? But no! He does not need money, they say."

"'They say' a great many things," I commented.

"It may be he did ill to leave America," she suggested. "One is so safe there. In Europe, who can say what the future holds? Russia is chaos. Turkey torn by war. Eastern Europe boiling. Germany thirsting for vengeance. Ah, Mr. Nash, were I an American I should stay at home."

"That sounds almost like a threat," I laughed.

"God forbid!" she ejaculated with true Russian piety. "It is that I envy you your security. All Serge and I can do is to wait and plot and plot and wait."

"Are you staying in England?" I asked.

"Only temporarily. We shall be in Paris shortly. Perhaps you would care to call when you—"

"I haven't any present intention of going to Paris," I cut in.

"I can't believe you," she replied. "Don't all good Americans expect to go to Paris when they die? Perhaps you will travel elsewhere, no?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You Americans are so venturesome," she sighed. "One never really knew you as a people until the War."

I happened to look up at that moment, and surprised the Italian in one of his lightning surveys of the room.

"Your friend there seems exclusive," I remarked.

"Oh, he?" she said hastily. "He speaks no English, and he is sensitive about it. He talks little in any case. These scientists, you know."

Hilmi Bey left the Italian's side, and sauntered over to us.

"A beautiful old room," he said. "Has it any history?"

"It's the oldest part of the present building," I told him. "I understand it represents a reconstruction during Elizabeth's reign."

"Ah! Faultless taste, isn't?" He swung around on me. "They tell me you are an architect. You must appreciate such a good job."

The fellow spoke very pleasantly, and yet there was something about him that aroused in me a continual desire to punch his face.

"You can't beat the old people who worked slowly and lovingly," I answered, forcing myself to be civil.

"That is a gorgeous fireplace," said the Countess.

"Ah, yes," he agreed, with his absurdly broad pronunciation. "Rather a quaint verse there, too, I see. How does it run?"

He picked it out slowly, with some help from the Russian girl.

**Whenne thatte ye Pappist Churchmanne
Woudde seke hys Soul's contente
Hee tookeened up ye Wysshinge Stone
And trodde ye Prior's Vent.**

"Deuced odd! What does it all mean?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," I said. "Nor has anybody else. It seems like a gratuitous slap at a certain religion, and as the author of the lines was noted for her religious bias, that is probably as good an explanation as any other."

Our conversation had attracted the attention of the others, and Mrs. Hilyer drew Nikka and the Count in front of the chimney-piece.

"You don't suppose there could be some secret meaning to those words, do you?" she asked.

"I wish you'd pick it out for me," I countered.

That was a query I had often put to myself.

"A key to something else, you know," she went on. "Our ancestors were fond of that sort of thing. They loved mystery, and life wasn't as safe in those days as it is in ours."

"It's perfectly thrilling," cried the Countess. "This is just the kind of room to house some wonderful secret—or perhaps a tragedy."

"At any rate, her meaning is successfully concealed," I said. "Always supposing she had a meaning."

I felt something behind me, and turned my head. The Italian had left the table in the center of the room and moved up to the fringe of our group. His green eyes, flaring with an uncanny vital force, were intent upon the rhyme on the overmantel.

"Humph," I thought to myself, "you may not be able to speak English, but you appear to be able to read it."

He growled something in an undertone to Mrs. Hilyer, and she nodded.

"Fascinating as your room is, I am afraid we must leave you, Lord Chesby," she called over to Hugh. "Signor Teodoreschi had just reminded me we have to put him on the London train before we drive home."

"I'll have your motors called up," returned Hugh impassively, as he and Hilyer joined the rest of us.

He rang and gave the necessary orders to Watkins.

"You really must come over and have a bit of bridge with us," Mrs. Hilyer bowled along merrily. "Of course, I know you are in mourning, but even so, you ought not to deny yourself all pleasure. Any evening at all. Do make it soon. So glad to have met you, Mr. Zaranko. I can't tell you how sorry I am you won't play for us. Mr. Nash, I've hardly had a word with you, but we'll better that over at Little Depping, won't we?"

The Countess extended her hand to me.

"I hope you will accept Mrs. Hilyer's invitation," she said, her eyes glowing softly. "It's such a pleasure to meet Americans. I'd love to ride with you one day this week."

"I'll ring you up," I prevaricated, feeling very much like doing it, if the truth be known—she had a way with her, that girl.

"And don't forget that tip on Krugersdorp for the St. Leger," I heard Hilyer insist to Hugh. "I'm not so sure about the Derby. When you run over to see us, I'll let you have a look at a sweet little filly I'm grooming for steeplechase work. You aren't takin' on any hunters, are you? I've—"

"By the way," Hugh interrupted. "I meant to ask you: did any of your people see strangers around here the morning of my uncle's funeral?"

I was amazed at the sudden silence that gripped the room. The Italian, Teodoreschi, already in the doorway after a curt nod of farewell, stopped dead and stared hard at Hugh.

"You see," Hugh continued, "I heard one of your cars was seen on the London Road in back of the park, and if—"

"But, my dear fellow," exclaimed Hilyer, "what's the trouble? There are always strangers passing through Chesby. You've got two trunk highways, remember."

"Quite so," agreed Hugh. "But I'm anxious to know whether any strangers were seen that morning, especially strangers on foot."

"Not that we've heard of," responded Mrs. Hilyer promptly. "All of us were at the funeral. And if the servants had noticed anything queer, I'm sure they would have reported it to me."

"Thanks," said Hugh. "Would it be too much trouble for you to inquire of them, just the same?"

"Not at all. D'you mind telling us what happened?"

The whole company crowded closer.

"Oh, nothing much," answered Hugh deliberately, "except we had reason to suppose the house had been entered."

"Great Scott!" protested Hilyer. "That's a go! We've never had anything like that before in the County. But with so many men out of work, and the unrest and whatnot, I suppose it's no more than to be expected."

"Did you lose anything, Lord Chesby?" inquired Hilmi Bey.

"I think not."

The Countess Sandra Vassilievna permitted an artistic shudder to undulate her figure.

"*Bozhe moi*, Maude!" she cried. "Do you bring us into your rural England to risk death from burglars? I prefer the Bolsheviks."

Several people laughed.

"All the same, it's no joke," answered Mrs. Hilyer. "Thanks for the warning, Lord Chesby. We'll let the dogs loose around the house after this at night."

Teodoreschi, still standing in the doorway, rasped a single sentence, and passed out. The others flocked after him like hounds over whom the huntsman cracks his whip. Mrs. Hilyer and the Countess waved a last good-by, and Watkins closed the door on them.

Nikka and I looked at one another, and burst out laughing. Hugh, with a muffled curse, threw up the nearest window.

"Let's have some fresh air," he said. "That scoundrel Montey Hilyer makes me feel dirty. He and his tips! And we must come over and play bridge! Yes, and roulette, too, I suppose, with a wired wheel. I say, you two, do I look like such an utter ass?"

"They were a queer crowd," I admitted. "That countess wasn't bad-looking, though."

"I noticed you stuck to her," insinuated Hugh.

"Nonsense, she singled me out. I think she was trying to pump me."

"Well, Hilyer didn't ask me any questions, I'm bound to say," returned Hugh. "He was too busy with his beastly gambling anecdotes, and crooked dope. What did you make out of them, Nikka?"

Nikka lit a cigarette before he replied.

"I think they are a party of polite thieves," he answered at last. "At least, some of them. The Italian I made nothing of."

"He didn't talk any," said Hugh.

"They said he couldn't speak English," I put in.

"You didn't notice, then, that he was listening to everything that was said," observed Nikka.

"No, but I saw him read the rhyme up there over the fireplace. He gave me the shakes."

"Who was the Bey person?" inquired Hugh.

Nikka's lip curled.

"That fellaheen cur! I know the breed. They live by graft and worse. If we go to Paris I think I shall make inquiries about some of them. I know persons at the Prefecture of Police who ought to have their dossiers."

We fell silent, as Watkins, the company out of the way, brought in tea.

"How did they get on the subject of that verse of Lady Jane's?" demanded Hugh suddenly.

"It was the countess and Mrs. Hilyer," I explained. "They saw it, and insisted on reading some hidden meaning into it."

As I spoke I looked up again at the overmantel where the Gothic characters showed dimly in the light from the smoldering logs and the rays of the sunset. I coned over the four lines deliberately. "Ye Prior's Vent." The last three words seemed to jump out at me. "Some secret meaning. . . . A key to something else, you know." Mrs. Hilyer's phrases reëchoed in my brain. I studied the rhyme a second time.

"Hugh," I said suddenly, "d'you happen to have with you the copy of that other verse of Lady Jane's?"

He produced it from his pocketbook, without speaking. We had read over the copy of the Instructions a score of time since our arrival at Chesby, but none of us had resorted to Lady Jane's whimsical effort.

I spread the copy before me:

Putte downe ye Ancicount riddel
In Decente, Seemelie ordour.
Rouse, O ye mystick Sybil,
Vex Hymme who doth Endeavour,
Nor treate Hys effortte tendour.

And in the winking of an eyelid the cipher leaped out before me. I did not reason it out. It just came to me—when I saw the VE in the next to the last line, I think.

"I've got it!" I shouted, and I sprang up and danced across the hearth, waving the paper in my hand. "I've got it!"

Hugh and Nikka regarded me in astonishment.

"Got what, you silly ass?" asked Hugh.

"It—the secret! The key! The cipher! The treas—"

But even as I started to say that, I thought better of it.

"No, that's going too far," I panted, breaking off in my mad dance. "I've got something, but how much it means is another matter."

Hugh pulled me down beside them.

"Talk sense, Jack," he ordered. "Show us your—"

"Here!" I shoved the copy of Lady Jane's doggerel in front of him and Nikka. "Now watch!"

I took a pencil and drew it through all except the first letters of the first and last words in each line. So:

~~Putte downe ye Ancicount riddel—~~
~~In Decente, Seemelie ordour.~~
~~Rouse, O ye mystick Sybil,—~~
~~Vex Hymme who doth Endeavour,~~
~~Nor treate Hys effortte tendour.~~

The result, of course, was:

P	r
I	o
R	s
V	E
N	t

"Prior's Vent!" gasped Nikka. "He *has* found something!"

And his eyes, too, sought the verse carved on the overmantel.

"Up there, too! It can mean only one thing."

"That the secret to the location of the treasure is in the Prior's Vent!" I added triumphantly.

"Or can be reached through the Prior's Vent," amended Nikka.

Hugh, who had been in a brown study, aroused himself, and peered at the mass of the fireplace.

"I'm not trying to belittle Jack's discovery," he said slowly, "but you chaps must remember that we don't know where or what the Prior's Vent is."

"Except that you may take it for certain it is in this room," replied Nikka.

"And that perhaps the fireplace has something to do with it," I suggested.

Hugh shook his head.

"No, no, Jack, that won't wash. You, yourself, have measured that chimney area, and we all agreed there wasn't space inside it for a secret chamber. If I thought there was, I'd tear it down."

"Hold on," counseled Nikka. "Easy does it. For the first time we've got something to go upon. Let's chew it over for a while, and see what we can make of it."

We chewed it over until bedtime without reaching any decision.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIGHT IN THE GUNROOM

IT was a long time before I went to sleep. Lady Jane's cipher and its inconclusive information kept buzzing through my head. But at last I dozed off and dreamed of fat monks who popped out of a round hole in a courtyard in endless succession until one of their number, stouter than the rest, became wedged in the opening. He babbled profanely in Latin, and I started to go to his aid—and waked up.

The night was very dark, and there was not even a hint of starshine to light the room. A dog was barking on the Home Farm just outside the park enclosure, but not another sound broke the silence. I rolled over, and shut my eyes, and promptly sat up in bed. I thought I had heard another sound. What it was I could not say. It was very faint, a gentle burring rip.

I swung out of bed, reached for a candle, thought better of it, and crossed to the door communicating with Hugh's room. It was ajar, and as I poked my head in, I could hear his gentle breathing. Nikka's room, beyond his, was quiet. Outside of us three, only Watkins slept in that part of the house. The servants' quarters were in the rear over the kitchens.

My first instinct was to laugh at myself, but I opened the door from my room into the hall and listened there. At first, I heard nothing. Then it seemed to me that I detected a creaking, as of subdued footfalls. I strained my faculties in tense concentration, but the creaking was not repeated, and I began to believe that my imagination was playing tricks with me.

To make sure, I crossed the hall in my bare feet, and listened at Watkins's door. Watkins, I regret to say, snored quite audibly, and I was inclined to suspect that he had been responsible for arousing me. But I could not quell the uneasiness which possessed me. I started to call Hugh and Nikka, and stopped with my hand raised to knock on Nikka's door. It would be a fool stunt to wake them for nothing but my own fancies.

After a moment's further hesitation, I crept downstairs into the entrance hall, groping my way in the pitch darkness. Feeling more than ever like a fool, I looked into the dining room and music room. I had just stepped back into the hall when a chink of light shone out of the short passage that led from the hall into the Gunroom. It flickered away, and returned.

Wishing now that I had taken the automatic that lay on the table beside my bed, I stole into the Gunroom passage. I still thought I might have to deal with one of the servants. In fact, I didn't think very much of anything, except the necessity of discovering the identity of the intruder.

The door of the Gunroom opened into the passage. It was ajar, but not sufficiently to permit me to see inside. I drew it cautiously toward me. The chink of light was more pronounced. A brief mutter of voices, hoarse and restrained, reached my ears. As the crack widened, I adjusted my eye to the opening and peered in.

The Gunroom was a pool of shadows, save only in front of the fireplace, where a single ray of light played upon a preposterous figure crouched on the mantle-shelf. The light came from an electric torch in the hand of a second figure outlined against the dying coals of the woodfire on the hearth. They mumbled back and forth to each other, and now I caught once more the faint noise like the prolonged ripping of tough cloth which had attracted my attention upstairs.

The light flashed on steel, and I realized that the figure on the mantle-shelf was working with a small saw on the panel of the over-mantle containing Lady Jane's verse. As I watched, he suspended his efforts and barked impatiently at his assistant. The ray of light quivered and shifted upward. For a fleeting section of a second it traversed the figure on the mantle-shelf and focussed momentarily on his head and shoulders.

I gasped. The figure on the mantle-shelf was Professor Teodoreschi, the Italian chemist who had accompanied the Hilyer's party. There was no mistaking the tremendous shoulders, the long ape-arms, the pallid face, with its high forehead and heavy jaw. He wore the same costume of shooting-coat and knickerbockers that he had had on in the afternoon.

In my amazement my hand tightened involuntarily its grip on the door, which swung out past me with a loud groan. Another beam of light flashed from the shadows close by, focussed on me and snapped off.

"Amerikansky!" cried a man's voice.

I heard him leap through the litter of furniture, and dimly saw him fling his torch at me. It crashed against the door, and I snatched up a chair, stooped low and lashed at his legs. He tumbled in a heap.

"Hugh! Nikka!" I shouted at the top of my lungs.

I had my hands full on the instant. The man who had flung the torch at me was already scrambling to his feet. The gorilla-like Italian had jumped from the mantle-shelf with the alert energy of a big cat. He and the man who had been helping him were now dodging towards me.

"*Ne tirez pas!*" hissed Teodoreschi in throaty accents that were vaguely familiar. "*Percez! Attendez, Serge, Vlada! Percez! Poignardez!*"

The Italian's helper reached me first. I saw his knife in his hand, and struck out with my fist. Being a knife-fighter, it was what he least expected, and he went over. I ran behind the large center table, and as the Italian

and the other man closed in, I reared it on end and toppled it at them. They jumped apart, and I found opportunity to heave another chair at the chap I had just knocked down.

But I was in for a bad time. Teodoreschi and the man who had first rushed me were ugly customers. I evaded them, slipped behind the couch that stood in front of the fireplace and tried to make for the window. They headed me off, and I drove a right hook to the jaw of my original foe that sent him reeling. Then the Italian was on me like a human juggernaut. He swept aside my blows as though they were harmless, folded me in his great arms and tossed me from him. I spun across the hearth into the fireplace, and brought up on all-fours in the ashes.

Every tooth in my head was jarred by the crash, but I had no time to think of pain. I heard the guttural snarl of the gorilla-man behind me, and looked up to see his knife descending in a stab that was aimed inside my collarbone. Desperate, I threw myself backward against his legs, and he fell on the couch. Yet he was up again in an instant, and chopping at me, with foam dripping from his lips.

I had to run, and as I ran, I kicked the fire-irons in his way. They tripped him and his knife went hurtling across the room into a bookcase. But I could not escape. His companions herded me back towards him, and presently I was battling to avoid his clutch. Once within his reach, I was helpless as a child.

His arms wrapped me like cables; his wicked green eyes blazed at me with insane ferocity; his teeth gnashed at my throat. And his two friends hovered near, watching for an opportunity to finish me with their knives.

Then I heard feet pattering in the hall, a cry of encouragement. I summoned all my strength for one last struggle.

"Shoot! Hugh! Nikka! Shoot!" I yelled.

Teodoreschi lifted me from my feet, and turned me face

upward in his arms. I honestly think he meant to gnaw through my throat. His pallid cheeks gleamed with sweat. His eyes were utterly inhuman. His mouth dribbled saliva. But an automatic cracked in the doorway, and was followed by a choking cry. He hesitated, glaring down at me, and I could almost see the human intelligence returning to his face. There were two more shots, and he slammed me on the floor, with a barking screech of defiance.

The next thing I remember was Hugh pouring raw Scotch whiskey down my throat—and how good it tasted.

“Did you get him?” I stammered.

“We got one fellow,” answered Hugh grimly. “Or I should say, Nikka did.”

I staggered to my feet with Hugh’s arm around me. In the doorway I saw Watkins, a nightshirt flapping around his calves, forcing back a motley group of servants. Nikka had picked up the electric torch which had been flung at me, and was examining by its light the body of a man that lay between the couch and the fireplace.

As Watkins closed the door, Nikka beckoned to him.

“Did they see this?” he asked shortly, pointing to the body.

“No, sir. None of them got inside, and it’s quite impossible to see be’ind the couch ’ere, sir.”

“Good! Oh, Hugh!” Nikka turned to us. “Hello, Jack! Do you feel yourself again?”

“I’m right as can be,” I insisted, which was the truth. “Nothing bothered me, except having the wind squeezed out of me by that gorilla.”

“What gorilla?”

“The Italian—Teodoreschi.”

“Oh, was he in it?”

Hugh and Nikka exchanged glances.

“Well, take a look at this fellow,” suggested Nikka.

He switched the torch on the body by the hearth. There was a red splotch over the heart. The right hand still

clutched convulsively a long knife, with a slight curve near the keen point of the blade. The light settled on a dark, thin, hooknosed face.

"Ever seen him before?" inquired Hugh.

"No," I admitted regretfully.

"Oh, Watty!" called Hugh.

"Yes, your ludship."

Watkins maintained all his usual dignity of demeanor, notwithstanding that he was in his nightshirt and bare feet, with a snuffed-out candle in one hand and an automatic in the other.

"Ever seen this man before?"

Watkins stooped, and almost instantly jerked erect.

"It's 'im, your ludship! It's the man that told us 'e came from you. On the *Aquitania*, sir! A just and 'Eavenly punishment, indeed, your ludship!"

"I'll take a little credit for it, if you don't mind," said Nikka, grinning.

"Jack, did you recognize the third man?"

I shook my head.

"The Italian was the only one whose face I saw."

"Well, I had a glimpse of Number Three as he escalated through the window after Teodoreschi—I'll take your word for the Italian! He—Number Three, I mean—looked very much like the Russian, the brother of that Countess you were so smitten with."

"I wasn't smitten with her," I denied indignantly. "Here, Hugh, don't drink all that whiskey."

"I like your nerve," he retorted. "Didn't I pour a quarter of the bottle down your throat?"

"Be that as it may," I went on when he had surrendered it, "I shouldn't be surprised if Number Three was the Count. Now I think of it, the Italian called 'Serge!' when they first jumped me."

"That would be right, then," agreed Nikka. "Did he call this carrion anything?"

He touched the dead man with his foot.

"He called 'Vlada!' at the same time."

"That sounds reasonable, too," said Nikka, deep in thought.

"Why?"

"The man is a—what you would call a countryman of mine. He is a Gypsy. I tell you, my friends—"

He broke off, and stared down at the body on the floor.

"What?" asked Hugh.

"Why, this. Our task grows as we draw nearer to it. I have said before that we face a gang of international thieves. But see how their importance swells. Hugh, this man Hilyer—when all is said and done, an English country gentleman, living to outward seeming within the law—is one of them. They have a pair of shady Russian nobles, probably with ex-spy records. We have seen a Levantine financier with them. We know they have powerful connections in America. We know they have access to the criminal organization of the Gypsies. We have seen an Italian scientist—"

"He's no more Italian than you are," I interrupted.

"He may be a scientist, but he's French."

"Who is he, then?" asked Nikka placidly.

"He is that same Toutou Hugh's uncle spoke of."

Hugh leaped up.

"How do you know that, Jack?"

"I just know, that's all. Yesterday afternoon I saw him, although I did not recognize him, as he normally is. He's fearsome enough in that mood, God knows! Well, a few minutes ago I saw him blood-crazed. He wanted to bite my throat out like a tiger. Oh, he's Toutou, all right."

Hugh's face grew bitter-hard.

"In that case," he said, "I am going to drive over to Little Depping, and do a bit of killing on my own."

Watkins, without a word, deposited his snuffed candle on the mantel-shelf next an open kit of burglar's tools, and stepped up beside his master.

"You can't do that sort of thing, Hugh," I urged.

"Why not? He's a murderer, isn't he? He killed my uncle—butchered the poor old chap! D'you suppose Hilyer would dare to complain to the police?"

"What you say is right enough, Hugh," said Nikka quietly, "but you forget that Hilyer's gang are hardly the kind to give up without a fight, especially when the man you want is their leader. Also, I fancy you under-rate your enemies' intelligence, if you suppose Toutou or Teodoreschi or whatever his name is will return to Little Depping."

"They prepared an alibi for him when they were here," I cried. "Don't you remember? When they were leaving, Mrs. Hilyer said that they had to put him on the London train before they drove home."

"And you can depend upon it that he took the train," added Nikka. "He probably dropped off at another station, and they met him with a car."

Hugh sat down gloomily.

"I suppose you are right," he admitted. "But I should like to shoot the swine."

"You are very likely to have the opportunity," Nikka comforted him. "That is, supposing you shoot first. Now, see here, you chaps, what are we going to do with this fellow I shot? We can't have any publicity, and while you may persuade servants not to talk about an ordinary burglary, you can't hush them up if it includes a killing."

"What's your suggestion?" asked Hugh.

"Remove him secretly, and tell the servants that nothing is missing and we don't want the affair talked about."

"The idea is good," assented Hugh. "I'm not anxious to have any more sensational interest attached to me, But what can you do with him? The body is in this room. It's got to be taken out. You can't bury a body without digging a grave. That means leaving a trace. Suppose some one should see us or suppose some one should

find the grave and investigate. Mind you, old top, whatever our motives, we are violating the law if we don't report the man's death."

"There may be a way out of your difficulty," I remarked.

"What is it?"

"Use the Prior's Vent."

They both looked at me as if I had gone mad. Even Watkins regarded me with stern disapproval.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Nikka.

"This is serious," reproved Hugh. "Just because you find a silly cipher—"

"I am serious," I insisted. "This has been an eventful evening. Among other things, I think I have found the Prior's Vent."

Hugh shook his head sadly.

"There's been too much talk of secrets," he said. "Watty, go and ring up Dr. North. He must have hurt his head in that mix-up."

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRIOR'S VENT

“**S**TAY where you are, Watkins,” I commanded.
“Let me have that torch, Nikka.”

I turned it on the over-mantel. An efficient kit of burglar's tools reposed on the mantel-shelf under the carven group of dancing monks, ale-horns and tankards waving aloft. The figure in the middle of the group had a comically protruding belly that seemed to waggle as the light played on it. But what interested me was the small flexible saw that was still fixed in the base of the panel above the dancing monks.

“Do you see what our friends were up to?” I asked.
“That fellow Toutou has a keen mind. He is somebody to be reckoned with. He saw what none of us saw, even after we had worked out the cipher.”

“What did he see?” asked Nikka.

For answer I switched the light on to Lady Jane's verse :

**Whenne thatte ye Pappist Churchmanne
Woudde seke Hys Soul's contente
He tokened up ye Wysshinge Stone
And trodde ye Prior's Vent.**

“He saw that,” I answered. “And he jumped to conclusions from it. He knew, as we knew, that there is something concealed in this house, probably in this room. And he thought that that verse would not have been placed just there unless there was a reason for it.”

“By Jove, I believe he was right!” exclaimed Hugh.

Nikka propped a chair against the mantle-piece, and climbed on to the shelf. The panel had been sawed through on both sides and part of the bottom.

"Go ahead," said Hugh. "It's ruined anyway. But I swear I don't see how there can be an opening in back there that wouldn't sound hollow when you rap over it."

While I held the light on the panel Nikka sawed away, and in fifteen minutes he had it detached from its beveled frame.

"Come up here, Hugh, and help me with it," he said, as he withdrew the saw, and Hugh climbed to his side.

They found a thin chisel in the burglar's kit, and with this Hugh gently pried the panel loose.

"It has a stone backing," cried Nikka disappointedly, as it came away.

In fact, we all experienced a profound feeling of disillusionment when Watkins received the panel in his arms, and the empty area of stonework was revealed, about four feet long and three feet high.

"Too bad," said Hugh, jumping down. "Especially as we could have gotten a body through an opening that size."

There came a yell of triumph from Nikka, and Watkins, whose eyes had been straining at the opening, shouted:

"There is something there, your ludship!"

Nikka was digging furiously with the chisel at what looked to be a dark stone in the very center of the empty area.

"It's an inner wood panel," he grunted over his shoulder. "I can feel something behind it."

There was a splintering noise, and the "stone" fell apart. Behind it was a shallow recess, perhaps nine inches square, completely filled by a rusty iron box. Nikka levered the box out, and handed it to Hugh.

"Your ancestress was a clever old person," he commented, dropping beside us on the couch. "Fancy her

figuring that the inner panel would prevent the recess from sounding hollow when it was rapped."

The box was about three inches deep. It was unlocked, and Hugh lifted the cover without difficulty. Inside were two papers, very brittle and yellow from the heat of the chimney. The first was a torn fragment from a household account book:

"Septr. ye 2nde, 1592.

"Paid Conrad of Nurnburgge ye Germanne masonne:

item, for sealinge ye Olde Cryptte belowe ye Priors

House: item, for ye engine for ye Priors Vent:

item, for ye pannellinge in ye Gunneroom £17 s9 d4

item, two boxes of Flanders iron s7

"Accompte £17 s16 d4"

And below this was written:

"And I sent Hyme forth of ye Vilage thatte Hee might not have Chaunce to talk howbeeit Hee ys clousemouthed and Hath littel Englysh."

It was impossible not to laugh at the invincible determination of Lady Jane.

"What did she do with the second box?" I suggested.

"Probably used it in another mystery," chuckled Nikka. "What's the other paper, Hugh?"

"It's the real thing! Great Jupiter, see what Toutou missed!"

And he spread the second paper on his knee. It was short and to the point:

"To Hymne thatte hath Witte to rede Mye riddel. Presse atte ye One time ye Sfinxes headde and ye Monkes bellie. So wil ye Flaggin drop in ye Dexter side of ye Harth. Thatte whych you Seke you shal Discovour in yts proper Place.

"JANE CHESBY."

I flashed the electric torch on the mantle-piece. "Ye

Sfinxes headde'' was in the very center of the row of Turks' heads and veiled women that was sculptured along the edge of the stone mantle-shelf. "Ye Monkes bellie'' was the bit of carving that protruded from the center of the bibulous group that had upheld the panel bearing Lady Jane's verse.

"I've pressed both of those more than once," I protested.

"But not both at once," answered Nikka.

He bounded up, and drove his two hands, palm out, against the projections. There was a muffled thud in the fireplace. I sank on my knees, and trained the electric torch inside. On the "dexter," or right-hand side, in the rear, yawned a hole some two feet square.

I crawled through the ashes, and thrust the torch over the rim. There was a sharp drop of three or four feet, and then the beginning of a flight of stairs, heavily carpeted with dust. A damp, earthy odor smote my nostrils. The others crawled in beside me. Even Watkins pulled his nightshirt around him and stuck his head in as far as he could get.

"Ever seen that before, Watty?" asked Hugh, backing out.

"Never, your ludship."

The valet's face was a study.

"'Is late ludship, Mister Hugh, was frequently in the 'abit of being alone, as I daresay you know. But 'ow in the world could 'e have found it, your ludship, if he didn't find out first about that?"

Watkins nodded toward the gaping hole in the over-mantle.

"I'm damned if I know," admitted Hugh. "Maybe we'll find out. By the way, how do you suppose you close the Vent?"

Nikka fingered the two projections, and the moment he applied pressure the flagstone slapped up into place.

"There's some counterweight arrangement," he said. "The fellow who designed this was a master-mechanic."

"Evidently," agreed Hugh. "Well, you chaps, we are another mile-stone farther on the road, but the first thing we have to do is to get the corpus delicti safely underground."

"Right," assented Nikka. "But we need clothes and food. You can't tell what we may run into."

For the first time I looked at myself, and burst out laughing at the spectacle I presented. My pajamas were torn to shreds, and I was smutted from head to foot with soot and ashes. Hugh and Nikka were little better. Watkins was as immaculate as a man in his night-shirt may be.

"Very well," said Hugh. "Then Jack had best go upstairs and wash, while Watkins gets dressed and fetches our clothes. In the meantime, Nikka and I can be disposing of our friend here."

We adopted this plan, and Watkins also volunteered to tell cook to start breakfast. The curtains had been close drawn over all the Gunroom windows, and I was amazed to perceive on leaving it that the sun was rising.

When I came downstairs twenty minutes later, Hawkins the butler, carrying a large tray, was knocking on the Gunroom door.

"I'll take it," I told him. "You go back to the kitchen like a good fellow, and keep the maids quiet."

I knocked for several minutes without result, and finally set the tray down, and banged the door with both fists.

"All right! All right!" called a strangely blanketed voice. "Who is it?"

"Jack!"

Feet scuffled inside, and the door was jerked open by Hugh, rather dusty and cobwebby.

"We were out under the Park," he explained. "We took that Gypsy down safely, and I came back ahead of

the others on the chance you might be trying to get in. There's a regular passage, Jack. It seems to go on and on. We didn't have time to follow it very far."

He set the table, which I had overturned, on its legs, and I brought in the tray. Then Nikka and Watkins emerged from the fireplace, blinking owlishly, and we three drew chairs up to the table, and Watkins served breakfast as deftly as though we had not departed a hair's-breadth from the ordinary routine of life.

"Have you had breakfast yet, Watty?" asked Hugh.

"No, your ludship."

"Sit down, then, and eat."

Watkins looked like a man instructed to undress in Piccadilly.

"Beg pardon, your ludship—"

"Sit down, man."

"But, your ludship—"

Hugh pointed to a chair.

"Damn it, Watty," he said severely, "bring that chair up, pour yourself some coffee and eat."

Watkins complied with an air of outraged decorum.

There was a knock on the door.

"Who's that?" said Hugh.

"It should be 'Awkins with the quick-lime, your ludship," answered Watkins, hastily pushing back his chair. "'E had to 'ave it brought from the stables."

"Take it from him, Watty—and then come back here and finish your breakfast."

"Why quick-lime?" I asked, as Watkins received a bulky, whitish-powdered sack through the half-opened door.

"We can't very well dig a grave in stone," was Nikka's grim comment.

Watkins dropped the sack on the hearth, and returned to his breakfast. He wanted very much to quit with one cup of coffee, but Hugh ordered him back and insisted that

a man who had work to do required not less than four slices of toast and three eggs.

"Bloated I'll be, your ludship," protested the valet. "Oh, if you will 'ave it!"

"I will," said Hugh. "You are going to be on guard here, Watty, while we are gone. Have you your automatic? Right O! Don't let anybody in."

He took the electric torch, and dropped the sack of lime down the hole in the fireplace. We climbed after it, one by one. The first stairs were extremely steep and the roof was so close that we had to stoop; but after we had descended perhaps fifteen feet, they turned to the right and the roof lifted to a little more than six feet.

"This is where the passage strikes off from the house," remarked Hugh.

The stairs continued to descend for another fifteen or twenty feet, and then straightened out. At the foot of the last step lay the body of the Gypsy. Hugh was carrying the lime-sack, so Nikka and I picked up the dead man, following Hugh, who lighted the way with the torch.

The passage was beautifully built, with an even floor, and wide enough for one man to walk comfortably. Despite a damp odor, it was not muddy, and there must have been some means of ventilation, for the air was reasonably fresh. According to a compass on Nikka's watch-chain, it trended across the Park towards the ruins of the Priory.

The Gypsy's body was a clumsy load to manage in so confined a space, and we halted every two or three hundred feet to rest. We estimated that we had walked a kilometer when we noticed a gradual upward slope in the flooring. The passage turned a corner, and the light of Hugh's torch was reflected on the rusty ironwork of what once had been a massive door.

Of the wood only a pile of dust remained, cluttered about the broken lock; but the great hinges still stretched across

the path, upholding a ghostly barrier of bolted darkness. We deposited the dead Gypsy on the floor, and helped Hugh to bend back the creaking iron frame. Beyond loomed a vast emptiness, a spreading, low-roofed chamber, studded with squat Norman pillars that marched in dim columns into unseen depths.

The torch scarcely could penetrate the heaped-up shadows, but as our eyes became accustomed to the room's proportions we realized that we stood on the threshold of a mausoleum similar to the one in which we had seen Lord Chesby laid to rest. Hugh stepped across the stone sill of the doorway, and swung the light back and forth between the pillars. Suddenly it glinted on metal.

We all pressed closer, staring at the picture that took shape under the white glare. On a stone shelf lay a skeleton in armor. The peaked helmet had rolled aside from the naked skull, but the chainmail of the hauberk still shrouded trunk and limbs. Next to it lay a smaller skeleton, clad in threads of rich vestments. There was a twinkle of tarnished gold cloth, a fragment of fur. A bygone Lord of Chesby and his lady!

"We are intruders in this place," I exclaimed. "It doesn't seem right, Hugh."

My voice rolled thunderously from roof to floor and wall to wall and back again, and the pillars split the echoes into parodies of words.

"Intruder—derr-rr-r—whirr-rrr-rr-r! Place—pla-aay-ayyay-ay!"

"One feels indecent in being here," agreed Nikka.

Hugh frowned down upon the two skeletons.

"They wouldn't mind," he said. "We have a reason for coming."

And while the echoes had their will with his declaration, he led us slowly around the circuit of the chamber.

Niche followed niche. On shelf after shelf lay the bones of men and women whose bodies had rotted ages ago. On one moldered the skeleton of a man in clerical rai-

ment, with what had been a miter on his skull, some cadet of the house who had entered the Church.

Halfway around we came to another shelf that held two skeletons. The inner, obviously a woman's, thrust its poor bones through the tattered fabric that robed it. The man wore an immense pot-helmet of the early type, with eye-holes and nasals drilled in the fashion of a cross. His chainmail was very finely-woven, and included mail shoes that had collapsed pathetically on crumbled bones. His gauntleted hands were clasped on the hilt of a long, two-edged sword, which lay upon his chest with the point between his feet. His left arm supported a kite-shaped shield that revealed traces of color beneath the over-lying dust.

On his chest, just above the clasped hands, was an iron box identical with the one which we had found behind the panel of the over-mantle, the second of the "two boxes of Flanders iron" which Conrad had furnished to Lady Jane.

Hugh switched his torch on the base of the shelf. In rough, angular Gothic characters we spelt the inscription:

Hic Jacet
Hugh Dominus Chesbiensis
et
Edith Domina Chesbiensis

"The first Hugh!" exclaimed Hugh with a note of awe in his voice.

And indeed, it must have been a moving experience to view the flimsy relics of those two from whose loins he, himself, had sprung through the resistless life impulse prevailing over time and death down the procession of the centuries.

He hesitated a moment, and then reached out reverently and removed the iron box from the mailed breast. Handing the torch to me, he raised the dingy cover. Inside was a chest of ebony, bound with silver, sound and whole. It

was unlocked. As Hugh lifted the lid, a sheet of paper fluttered out and Nikka caught it. Across the top was engraved "Castle Chesby," and it was covered with fine, cramped writing.

"It's Uncle James's record," said Hugh. "After the exultation of plumbing the mystery to be murdered like a dog! Poor old chap!"

The note or record was whimsically brief and undated:

"Last Thursday evening, in studying Lady Jane's doggerel on the back of the Instructions, I suddenly perceived the cipher. It occurred to me that the verse on the over-mantel in the Gun-room must have some connection with this, and after several days' examination, I fell upon the secret. I say fell, advisedly. In my interest in the task, I had shut myself up, and refused luncheon, tea and dinner, and finally, late in the evening, I sank against the mantle-shelf, weak and half-fainting. My hands, groping for support, struck the sphinx's head and the monk's stomach. I felt them give, heard the flagstone fall. After that hunger was forgotten. I descended the chimney stairs and found my way here, the first Chesby to traverse the Prior's Vent since that singular old ancestress of mine so effectually concealed it, and with it, the clue to the treasure. I do not see now how I can fail to find the treasure, but I shall leave the missing half of the Instructions, together with this note, in Lady Jane's chest, so that, if I should fail, the information may be available for Hugh.

"JAMES CHESBY."

"This was what he tried to tell—at the last," said Hugh.

His voice choked.

"Poor old chap!"

"There is something peculiar about his finding the secret in one way and our finding it in another so shortly afterward," I said.

"The soothsayers of my people would call it a sign, a premonition," replied Nikka, with a melancholy smile.

"Of what?"

"Of the removal of whatever curse or inhibition has prevented the discovery of the treasure up to this time."

"Well, two men have died already since this last search was begun," answered Hugh, fumbling in the chest. "And who knows how many others have been killed on its account?"

He drew out a bundle wrapped in decaying velvet cloth. Within was a wrapping of silk, and under all a folded blank sheet of parchment enveloping two other documents. One was a parchment, tattered and worn, which had evidently been much handled. It was jaggedly cut at the top as though by a dull knife or some other instrument. Its surface was crowded with the same intricate Black Letter script in mediæval Latin as comprised the Instructions in the Charter Chest. The writing was badly faded, and a number of words in the lower right-hand corner had been smudged by dampness at some remote time.

The second document was a pencilled translation of the first in James Chesby's handwriting:

"The Great Palace—or as some call it, the Palace of the Bucoleon—is over against the Hippodrome and the Church of St. Sophia. In the Inner Court, which fronts upon the Bosphorus, there is a door under the sign of the Bull. Beyond the door is a hall. At the end of the hall there is a stair. At the foot of the stair there is a gate. Pass through the gate into the atrium which is off the Garden of the Cedars. In the Garden is the Fountain of the Lion. From the center of the Fountain take four paces west toward the wall of the atrium. Then walk three paces north. Underfoot is a red stone an ell square. Raise the

"... farewell, my son, and forget not the monks of Crowden Priory and the plight of Jerusalem.

"Thine in the love of Christ and the Sainted Cuthbert,

"HUGH."

Beneath this Lord Chesby had scrawled:

"The missing portion is not essential. Below the stone is the treasure. That seems certain."

We looked at one another, hardly able to believe our senses. The thing had appeared so difficult, so unattainable. And now it was almost within our grasp—or so we reasoned in the first flush of confident anticipation.

"It's a question, of course, whether any portion of the Palace of the Bucoleon remains," Nikka pointed out.

"But Uncle James seemed to have no doubt of that," answered Hugh. "Do you remember, Jack?"

A wild shout bellowed from the mouth of the passage, roared and clanged like a trumpet-blast and was shattered by the echoes.

"Your lud'—Mis' Jack! Mis' Nikka!"

CHAPTER IX

HIDE AND SEEK

HUGH slipped the penciled translation in his pocket, swiftly rewrapped the Black Letter original and stowed it in the ebony chest, and re-fastened the iron box, which he returned to its former place on the mailed breast of his dead ancestor.

"That's Watkins," he said. "Something has happened up above. Come on, you chaps."

In the doorway he paused by the body of Toutou's gangster.

"What about this?" he demanded. "I won't have him left in there—with those."

He gestured toward the silent forms that filled the sepulcher.

"No need to," returned Nikka curtly, emptying the lime-sack as he spoke. "Leave him here."

We trotted on, and when we passed the first turn in the passage, just beyond the wreck of the ancient door, we saw a light that bobbed up and down in the near distance.

"Your ludship!" wailed Watkins's voice through the booming echoes.

"Steady on, Watty," Hugh called back. "I'm here."

"Thank God! Oh, your ludship, I'm that—"

Watkins panted up to us quite out of breath. He carried a dwindling candle in one hand, and his usually tidy garments were coated with dust.

"Must—apologize—ludship—appearance—fell—stairs," he began.

"Easy, easy," said Hugh comfortingly, and fell to

brushing him off. "If it's bad news, why, it's bad news, Watty. If it's good news, it can wait."

"It was a lady, your ludship!"

We all laughed.

"A lady!" repeated Hugh. "Bless my soul, Watty, are you gettin' dissolute in your old age?"

"She 'ad nothing to do with me, your ludship," remonstrated the valet indignantly. "Leastwise, I should say, she 'ad no more to do with me than make a mock of me and the pistol you gave me."

"How's that?"

"Took it away from me, she did, your ludship." Watkins's voice quivered with wrath. "And tripped me on me back. Yes, and laughed at me!"

"A lady, you said?" demanded Hugh incredulously.

Watkins nodded his head.

"And hextreemely pretty, too, if I may say so, your ludship."

Hugh looked helplessly at Nikka and me.

"I say, this is a yarn!" he exclaimed. "Watty, for God's sake, get a grip on yourself. Begin at the beginning, and tell everything."

He grinned.

"Conceal nothin', you old reprobate, especially, if there were any amorous episodes with this lady."

"Your ludship! Mister Hugh, sir!" Watkins's expression was a study in injured innocence. "You will 'ave your bit of fun, I suppose. As for me, sir, if I was for making love to some female I'd take one that was not so free with her strength."

"Are you sure it was a woman?" interrupted Nikka.

"Judge for yourself, sir, Mister Nikka. After you gentlemen left me, I tidied up the room, and quite a time had passed, I should judge, when I heard a click, and one of the windows opened in the south oriel."

"That's the one Toutou and his man escaped through," I broke in. "They probably fixed the lock."

"Very likely, sir. I turned when I 'eard the click, and the lady stuck 'er leg over the sill."

"Stuck her—" Hugh gasped.

"Quite so, your ludship. She 'ad on riding-breeches. A very pretty lady she was, your ludship," added Watkins contemplatively.

"So you've said before," commented Hugh. "And what next?"

"I said: 'Who are you, ma'am?' And she laughed, and said: 'Oh, it's only me, Watkins.' And I said: 'Well, ma'am, I'm sure I don't know 'ow you come to 'ave my name, but I really can't permit you to come in 'ere. Please get down, and go around to the front door.'

"With that she 'opped over the window-sill, and stood there, looking about 'er. 'Come on, now, if you please, ma'am,' I said again. And I'm sure, your ludship, I was considerate of 'er all the way through."

"I'll bet a pony you were," said Hugh sympathetically.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, your ludship. She looked around, as I said, and she walked over to the fireplace as cool as a cucumber. 'I see they did find it, after all,' she says, and she stooped and peeked in at the 'ole where the stone 'ad dropped. At that I knew she could be no friend, so I poked the pistol at 'er, and said: 'I don't want to 'arm you, ma'am, but you'll 'ave to come outside with me.'

"'Oh,' she says, 'you wouldn't 'urt me, Watkins. You're a nice, kind, old valet, aren't you?' "

Watkins's voice throbbed with renewed indignation, and we all three, the gravity of the situation forgotten, collapsed on the dusty floor.

"Go on, go on," gasped Hugh.

"'Ow can I, your ludship, if you're laughing all the time?" protested Watkins. "Oh, well, you will 'ave your fun!"

"So did she," I chuckled.

"She did, sir," agreed Watkins with feeling. "She came right up against the pistol, and put out 'er 'and and

patted my cheek like, and the first thing I knew, gentlemen, she 'ad tripped me and grabbed the pistol from my 'and, and there was I, lying on the floor, and she with 'er legs straddled over me, pointing the pistol at me, and laughing like sin.

" 'Get up,' she says. And she went and sat sidewise on the table, with the pistol resting on 'er knee."

"What was she like, Watty?"

"She 'ad black hair, sir, and was dark in the face. She wasn't big, but she was—well, shapely, you might say. And she 'ad a way of laughing with 'er eyes. She asked me where you were, and what you had found, and I stood in front of her, and just kept my mouth shut. 'I might shoot you if you won't talk,' she says. 'And if you do, there'll be those that will hear it, and you'll be seen before you get away,' I told 'er. 'True,' says she, 'and I couldn't bring myself to do it, anyway. You're too sweet. You can tell your master, though, that we're not sorry he's found what he was looking for. If we couldn't find it, the next best thing was for him to find it. Whatever he does, he will play into our hands.'"

"Then she walked over to the window, and dropped the pistol on a chair. ' 'Ere,' she says. 'You might 'ave me taken up for breaking and entering if I went off with this.' And she 'opped over the sill on to the lawn. When I got there she was in 'er saddle and riding away. I tried to telephone to the Lodge to 'ave 'er stopped, but the wires were cut. They must 'ave done it in the night, your ludship. 'Awkins was unable to get through to any of the village tradespeople this morning."

"Was that all?" asked Hugh.

"Yes, your ludship. I called 'Awkins, and told 'im to stand in the front door, and send away anybody who came. Then I climbed down into the 'ole, thinking you would wish to know what 'ad 'appened immediately, your ludship."

"You did quite right, Watty. I don't blame you for what happened. The lady must have been a Tartar."

Hugh turned to us.

"It seems to me the lesson for us in this last experience is that we have got to move rapidly if we are going to shake off Toutou's gang," he said. "They are fully as formidable as Nikka warned us they would be. We ought to start for Constantinople this afternoon."

"There's no question of that," assented Nikka. "But what are you going to do with the key to the treasure? You have it in your pocket now, but it is a long journey to Constantinople. Suppose they steal it en route? They may have plenty of opportunities, you know. Personally, I am not sanguine of shaking them off. Then, too, you must remember that Constantinople is the human sink of Europe, Asia and Africa, more so to-day even than before the War. It swarms with adventurers and dangerous characters. The refuse of half-a-dozen disbanded armies make their headquarters there. It will be a simple matter for a gang like Toutou's to waylay you or search your baggage."

Hugh flushed.

"I had thought of that," he said. "Er—the fact is—Jack has a cousin—a girl we both know—"

"You mean you do," I interrupted sarcastically. "I'm only her cousin. Have you heard from Betty?"

"Yes, damn you! She and her father are at the Pera Palace—he's an archæologist-bibliophile Johnny, Nikka, and an awfully good sort."

"And the girl?" inquired Nikka, with his quiet grin.

"Oh, you'll meet her, too. She's very different from what you'd expect in a cousin of Jack. Anyhow, she knows about this treasure business, and she read of Uncle James's murder, and she's most fearfully keen to be in the game with us. My suggestion is that I mail Uncle James's translation of the key to her in Constantinople.

Nobody knows that she knows me or has any connection with any of us. She left New York before Uncle James arrived. So it would be perfectly safe in her hands."

"And in the meantime, we'd better commit it to memory," I said.

The others agreed to this, and we read over the brief transcript of the missing half of the Instructions until we had the salient directions fixed in our minds. Then we retraced our steps through the passage, climbed out of the Prior's Vent and sealed it again; and while Hugh and Nikka motored down to the village post office with the letter for Betty, Watkins and I saw to the necessary packing in preparation for the journey.

We had bags ready for all four of us by lunchtime, and arranged with Hawkins to send trunks after us to the Pera Palace in bond. When Hugh and Nikka returned from the village, all that was necessary was to eat the meal, issue final directions to the servants for the repairing of the panel of the over-mantle—the removal of which we represented to have been the work of the burglars—and fill up the tank of the car.

With an eye to a possible emergency, we had arranged in advance for a considerable supply of gold and negotiable travelers' notes, and our passports, thanks to Hugh's influence, had been viséd for all countries in southern and eastern Europe.

"There's only one thing we lack," remarked Hugh, as we drove out through the park gates. "I want an electric torch for each of us. The one we captured came in very handy this morning."

So we stopped at the shop of the local electrician in the village, and Hugh went in to make the purchase. He was just resuming his seat in the car when another machine drew up alongside, and Montey Hilyer waved a greeting.

"Thought you were going to stay in the County a while, Hugh," he hailed.

Hugh stared at him with the concentrated iciness which the English of his class attain to perfection.

"Are you touring?" continued Hilyer. "Or going abroad? Seems to me I heard something this morning about your taking a trip to Constantinople. A favorite hang-out of your uncle's, I believe. Well, if you're following the Dover road, you mustn't mind if I trail you. I have no objection to a knight errant's dust."

Without a word, Hugh slipped in his gears and zoomed off on first, scattering dogs and pedestrians right and left.

"Damn the scoundrel!" he ripped between clinched teeth. "How I wish I could show him up! Who was with him?"

Nikka and I both shook our heads.

"There were three people in the tonneau," answered Nikka, "but the cover was up, and they were buried in wraps. Did you notice your pretty lady, Watty?"

"No, sir. I couldn't say."

All the way to Dover Hilyer's green car tracked our wheel marks two or three hundred yards behind. Once, near Godmersham, Hugh speeded in an endeavor to shake him off. But Hilyer stuck to us without difficulty, and ran up close enough to show his derisive grin at the end of the spurt.

On the channel boat again we had the sensation of being watched, although we could not have pointed to any persons and accused them of spying; and certainly none of the members of the Hilyer house party was in evidence. Hilyer, himself, called good-by to us from the dock.

"Have a good time," he shouted genially. "If you get to Constantinople, you may see me later."

At Calais we passed the Customs and passport officials expeditiously because both Hugh and Nikka were personages—a doubtful asset, as we were soon to learn. And on the Paris train we actually thought that we had eluded surveillance—until we rolled into the Gare du Nord and

started to disembark. It was Nikka who discovered the little red chalk mark on the door of our compartment, and Watkins who spotted a furtive individual who slunk down the corridor as we stepped into it, a rat-faced fellow of the Apache type that had disappeared during the War and somehow floated back with other scum to the surface of peacetime life.

We were all of us familiar with Paris, Nikka and I perhaps more so than Hugh. And we drove to a small hotel near the Louvre which is noted for its table, its seclusion and its steady patronage. Aside from the fact that it is a little difficult to get a bath there, it is the best hotel I know of in the French capital. The proprietor welcomed us as old friends, and we were provided with the choicest fare and the most comfortable rooms he had to offer.

The four of us were dog-tired—remember, we had been steadily “on the prod,” as Hugh said, since we wakened in the early morning hours to repel Toutou’s invasion, and the nervous strain had been wearing. But before we turned in, after M. Palombiere’s magnificent dinner, Nikka telephoned a private number at the Prefecture of Police.

The result of his call was demonstrated when we went down to breakfast the next morning. A jaunty little man in a top-hat and frock-coat, with spats and a gold-headed cane, flew up to Nikka and embraced him in the center of the lobby. And Nikka introduced him to us as M. Doumergue, Commissaire of the Police de Suretie, or Secret Police.

Would he do us the honor of taking breakfast with us? Mais, certainement! It was a pleasure of the greatest to have the company of M. Zaranko and his cher colleagues. His regrets were unspeakable that he might not have an extended opportunity to make our acquaintance, as he understood from M. Zaranko that we must depart that same day. He had taken the necessary steps already to dispense with the usual formalities for arriving and de-

parting travelers, and he had also examined the dossiers of the individuals M. Zaranko had named.

This last was what especially interested us; and we listened closely to the facts he recited from a notebook.

"Of Toutou LaFitte, Messieurs, but little can be said. If you have seen him, then you have seen one whom no police official can claim knowingly to have laid eyes on. But we feel him, Messieurs. We hear of him. We sense his manifold activities. If the stories which others, like yourselves, tell us are true, he is a genius, a monster. He rules the criminal world. He has the brain of a statesman, the instincts of an animal.

"Hilmi Bey we know well. During the war he found it convenient to dwell in Switzerland. He has been mixed up in various shady coups, both in Egypt and in Turkey. He has sources of income we have never been able to discover. Prior to this nobody has associated him with Toutou.

"And this Russian pair! Vassilievich and Vassilievna! They are notorious as international spies. Before the war they worked in the German interest. During the War, who can say? Had we caught them they would have been shot out of hand. But the War is over, I regret to say, Messieurs. They hold their titles of right, and undoubtedly come of an honorable family or families. For as to their being brother and sister—*tien!* Why worry about the unessential?

"The Hilyers have been watched since before the War on suspicion of being implicated in dishonorable gambling transactions. But in France, Messieurs, a wide latitude is allowed in these matters, and so far, we have not been able to catch them—how is it the excellent Americans say? Ah, yes, *wiz zee goods*.

"Is this of assistance? I regret deeply I cannot add more. But if I can aid you in any way, if you are annoyed in Paris or subjected to observation, pray call upon me."

He bowed himself out.

“That’s all very well,” remarked Hugh, as we wandered over to the newstand in the lobby, “and his information is valuable, Nikka, but we can’t call on him officially! If we complain of being shadowed at the Prefecture of Police, they will ask us the object of it; and if we tell them the truth, you can be sure the secret will leak out. Why, the policeman who didn’t use such information would be a fool! No, lads, the only thing for us to do is to dodge our trailers.”

I shook the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail* in front of him.

“How the devil can we dodge trailers?” I demanded. “I just picked up this paper, and look at what I see on the front page.”

There under a two-line head was the following announcement:

“Lieut. Col. Lord Chesby, D.S.O., accompanied by Mr. Nikka Zaranko, the famous violinist, and Mr. John Nash, an American friend, crossed on the Calais boat yesterday and arrived in Paris last night. Lord Chesby recently succeeded to the title under circumstances of very tragic interest.”

“There’s only one thing to do,” said Hugh. “Where’s Watkins? We’ll collect him, and book for the first train to Marseilles. They’ll expect us to go direct by the Orient Express.”

CHAPTER X

STOLE AWAY

WE rather prided ourselves on our cleverness as we sat back in a reserved compartment of the Lyons-Mediterranean Express, and watched the Tour Eiffel fade against the sky. We had moved with considerable celerity. First, we had loaded ourselves and baggage into waiting taxis in front of the hotel. Then we had driven in these to the Gare de l'Est, dodged in and out of that whirlpool of life, and reëntered two other taxis, which we had directed in a reasonless jaunt through the central district of Paris.

Then Nikka and I had left Hugh and Watkins with the taxis in a side-street near the Madeleine, and bought the tickets at Cook's. We had returned to the taxis by a roundabout route, and resumed our crazy progress from one side of the river to the other and back again, now crawling up the slopes of Montmartre, now threading the narrow ways of the Isle du Cité, now buried in the depths of the Quartier, now spinning through the Bois. We had lunched at a roadhouse, and returned to the station just in time to climb aboard the train. And finally, instead of risking the separation entailed by patronage of the wagons lit, we had elected to seclude ourselves in a single compartment and sleep as best we could.

Hugh voiced the sentiments of three of us, when he stretched out his legs and exclaimed:

"What price Toutou's vermin now? I jolly well bet they esteem us artful dodgers."

Nikka smiled.

"Don't be too sure," he cautioned. "Eluding detection is their life-work. We are only amateurs."

"Rats," grunted Hugh. "Sherlock Holmes, himself, couldn't have traced us, eh, Watty?"

"I'm sure I don't see 'ow any one could 'ave followed us, your ludship," replied the valet wearily. "I don't quite know where I am myself, sir."

"I fear you haven't any submerged criminal instincts, Watty," chaffed Hugh. "Now I find myself gettin' a bit of a thrill out of this hide-and-seek stuff. By Jove, I almost wish we had the police after us, too. That would be a treat!"

"A fair treat!" groaned Watkins. "I mean no disrespect, your ludship, and it may be there's no call for the remark, but glad I'll be when this treasure is safe in the bank and we can go 'ome to Chesby."

We all laughed.

"How about dinner?" I asked. "Shall we eat by shifts or—"

"What's the use?" returned Hugh. "We haven't anything that will do 'em any good, and besides, they're peekin' into all the compartments of the Orient Express at this moment."

So we adjourned together to the restaurant-car, dragging Watkins with us, much against his will; and we ate a jovial meal, all relieved by the relaxation in the strain which had been imposed upon us and enjoying the comic reluctance with which Watkins permitted himself to be forced to sit at the table with Hugh.

"Dammit, Watty!" Hugh finally explained. "You're not a valet on this trip. You're a brother adventurer. I don't want any valeting. I'm taking you along for the benefit of your strong right arm."

"All very well, your ludship," mourned Watkins, "but if the Servants' 'All ever 'ears of it it's disgraced I'll be. I couldn't 'old up me 'ead again."

"I'll take care of that. And do you think we'd leave you to eat by yourself? Suppose that pretty lady of

yours came in and sat down beside you. What would you do?"

"I'd 'eave 'er out the window, your ludship," said Watkins simply.

We loafed through dinner, and complete darkness had shut down when we returned to our compartment.

"I say," exclaimed Nikka, as he switched on the light. "Was your bag up there when we left, Hugh?"

Hugh studied the arrangement of the luggage on the racks.

"Can't say," he admitted finally. "But it ought to show if it's been pawed over."

He hauled it down, and opened it. Everything apparently was in perfect order.

"Hold on, though," he cried, pursing his lips in a low whistle. "Watty, you packed this bag. Don't you usually put razors at the bottom?"

"Yes, your ludship."

"They're on top now. So are my brushes. Everything in order, but—What do you say to giving this train a look-over, Jack? If there are any familiar faces aboard we ought to be able to spot them. Nikka, you and Watty can mount guard here and protect each other until we come back."

Our car was about in the middle of the train, and at my suggestion, Hugh went forward, while I followed the corridor toward the rear. I examined carefully the few persons standing and talking in the corridors, and violated Rule One of European traveling etiquette by poking my head into every compartment door which was open. But I did not see any one who looked at all like any of the members of Toutou's gang whom I knew. In fact, the passengers were the usual lot one sees on a Continental through-train.

I was returning and had reached the rear end of our car when I heard a scream just behind me and a door

crashed open. I turned involuntarily. A woman in black, with a veil flying around her pale face, ran into the corridor, hesitated and then seized me by the arm.

"Oh, Monsieur! My husband! He is so ill," she cried in French. "He dies at this moment. I pray you, have you a flask?"

The tears were streaming from her eyes; her face was convulsed with grief. I reached for my flask.

"Calm yourself, madame," I said. "Do you take this. I will ask the guard to help in finding a physician."

"Oh, no, no," she protested. "He has fallen. He is so heavy I cannot lift him. And he dies, monsieur! Oh, mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!"

I slipped past her into the compartment, flask in hand. One of the electrics was on, and by its light I discerned the body of a man huddled face down on the floor in the midst of a litter of baggage and wraps. I dropped the flask on one of the seats, and leaned over to hoist the man up. As I did so she reëntered and closed the door, still babbling brokenly in French.

"If you will help me, please, madame," I suggested. "He is very heavy, as you say."

"But gladly, monsieur. If you will turn him over—so that we may see if he breathes."

The man was breathing, stertorously, long, labored gasps. I could see very little of him, only an unusual breadth of shoulder and a sweeping black beard. But I experienced an odd sensation of distaste as I touched him, and snatched my hands away. The woman began to sob.

"Oh, monsieur, he will choke! He will choke!"

I felt like a cur, and promptly braced my hands beneath his chest. I started to lift him—and my wrists were caught in a human vice. So quickly that I could not follow his movements, the inert man on the floor had twisted me down beside him, his knee was on my chest, my wind was cut off, a pair of steel handcuffs fettered me, and as I opened my mouth to scream a cotton gag was

thrust into place by the woman who had lured me in.

"Voilà!" she said complacently, knotting the cords of the gag around my neck. "Or if you'd rather have it in American, Mr. Nash, you're it. Here, Toutou, get off him. You won't help by crushing his chest in."

She gave my captor a shove, and he rose with a growl and a menacing gesture of clawed hands to take a seat by the door. I could see now that he was Toutou or Teodoreschi, cleverly disguised. The black beard concealed his intensely pallid face and fell to his waist. A soft cloth hat hid the fine contour of his skull. His immense chest was minimized by loose, ill-fitting clothes. And the evil green eyes, flaring with animal lusts, were ambushed behind dark spectacles.

"Get up," said the woman.

She stooped and put her hands under my arm-pits, exerting a strength amazing for her size. I staggered up and collapsed on the seat opposite Toutou and as far away from him as I could get. I was weak from the vigor of his handling and the nausea his touch had aroused. Inwardly, I cursed myself for a fool. I had been neatly trapped at the very moment I was priding myself on being on the alert.

The woman sat down opposite me, tossed back the veil which had been hanging loosely around her face, picked up a vanity case and commenced to wipe a generous layer of powder from her cheeks.

She was of a Latin brunette type, with masses of wavy black hair, great lustrous brown eyes and a piquant beauty of face. As her profile was exposed to me my memory was jogged awake. She was Watkins's pretty lady! And I was reinforced in this conclusion when I recalled the muscle she had exhibited in helping me up, the off-hand expertness with which she had gagged me, performances reminiscent of the way the valet had been tripped and despoiled of his pistol.

After a muttered interchange of words with Toutou in

a language I did not understand, she fastened her gaze on me, and evidently something of my thoughts was reflected in my face, for she burst out laughing.

"You can't make me out!" she jeered in an unmistakable American accent. "You're not the first, Mr. Nash. How is old Watkins? He knows Hélène, too, and I'll bet he never wants to see me again. I laugh whenever I think of him lying there on the floor gaping up into his own pistol. And say, you were lucky that day. I came near fetching a bomb with me, and if I had I sure would have piled it into that passage. Where would you have been then, eh?"

She chuckled impishly, and Toutou from the shadows at his end of the compartment—as I came to find out, the man had an animal's aversion for the light when his enemies were present—snarled a sentence that was partly French, partly something else.

"Your affectionate friend tells me to quit kidding and get down to business," she interpreted with a smile. "I'm going to take that gag out, Mr. Nash, and Toutou is going to sit beside you with his hand on the back of your neck, and if you so much as start to yip he'll break it just as if you were a chicken." Her eyes glinted harshly. "Do you get me? That goes."

I nodded my head. Toutou moved up beside me, and a shiver wrenched my spine, as his hand unfastened the gag and enclosed my neck.

"We are perfectly safe," she continued. "You are my insane husband. We are Americans, and I am taking you to relatives in Italy. Toutou is the physician in charge of the case." She reached inside her bodice and produced some papers. "Here are your passport and a medical certificate. Everything is in order.

"The one question is: are you going to do business with us willingly or must we make you?"

I moistened my lips.

"I don't know what you mean," I answered as coolly as

I could. "I haven't got anything you might want. Search me."

"I will."

She dug out every pocket. She opened my vest, felt for a money-belt, felt inside my shirt, took my shoes off, examined them carefully by flash-light, and made sure I had nothing in my socks. She was a methodical person, that lady. Having searched me, she put everything back in its proper place, drew on my shoes and laced them. Then she sat back and stared at me.

"And there was nothing in the baggage," she commented.

I grinned. But quickly subdued my amusement as Toutou snarled beside me and his steel fingers pressed until my neck was numb.

"None of that, Toutou," she ordered sharply. "What about your friends, Mr. Nash?"

"None of them has anything."

"But you found something. You must have. What was it?"

She leaned forward, and her eyes bored into mine. I stared back uncompromisingly.

"I don't want to have to let Toutou hurt you," she warned softly.

At that something in me burst into flame.

"It doesn't matter what he does," I spat at her. "He can't make me tell you anything. As a matter of fact, I haven't anything definite, none of us has. But if we had, we wouldn't tell. I'll die before I help your gang."

That sounds like stage heroics, but I was in an exalted mood. I could feel Toutou's grip on my neck, and I imagined I didn't have long to live in any case.

"It's only a question of time," she went on. "You don't realize that you and your friends are alone in this. You have a great organization against you. You have as much chance as the fly after he touched the flypaper. All we have to do is to watch you, and at the worst we

can take the treasure away from you when you find it."

"Then why are you so anxious now?" I rasped with a fair mimicry of Toutou's feline rage.

"'There's many a slip'—" she quoted. "We don't believe in leaving anything unnecessarily to chance. You know, you are in a hopeless position, my friend. Why not talk sensibly? We can easily get rid of you and your friends, if we care to."

"You'll find it harder, the longer you delay," I flashed at her. "You are educating us."

She laughed as merrily as a convent schoolgirl.

"So I see." She leaned closer coaxingly. "Now, just between the two of us—we're Americans, aren't we?—what did you find behind the chimney? After all, it was Toutou who really saw the point first."

"That's true," I agreed, "but we would have seen it."

"Oh, you would! Then what did you find? Come, let's get this over with! We'll make an accommodation. Think—"

There was a buzz of voices in the corridor. I heard a dry official monotone, then Hugh's clipped English French and Nikka's smooth accent.

"But he must be on the train, Monsieur—"

"Ah, but if—"

"There can be no question he is in one of the cars. What objection—"

"There are people who sleep, women who—"

"But surely we can search—"

The woman opposite me hissed one swift sentence to Toutou, and rose, crouching towards the door. Hugh's voice, tense and passionate, thundered over the dispute:

"I don't give a damn for your rules! My friend is missing! I'm going to look—"

A hand rattled the knob of the door. Hélène ripped off her waist, dropped her skirt to the floor, and tumbled her hair over her shoulders—all in two consecutive movements. As she unlocked the door, she clutched her lingerie about

her. Toutou reached up one hand, and twitched off the single light; his other hand compressed my neck and throat so that I could hardly breathe. Hélène, herself, pushed open the door.

"Why the disturbance, messieurs?" she questioned silkily in French with the Parisian tang. "In here we have illness. Is it necessary—"

One look was enough for them, I suppose. It would have fixed me, I know. I heard Hugh's boyish gasp, and Nikka's apology.

"It was a mistake, madame. A friend is missing. We thought—"

"Here there are only ourselves," she assured them holding the door wider.

Hugh cursed bluntly in Anglo-Saxon, and the guard joined his voice in hectic phraseology. Hélène slowly re-closed the door.

"The light once more, Toutou," she whispered, and then she sank on the seat and laughed as she had before like a schoolgirl on a lark.

Toutou's face was demoniac despite beard and glasses. Hélène saw the purple flush on my cheeks, my straining nostrils.

"Beast!" she hissed. And she slapped him with her bare hand. He cowered before her. She snatched the gag from my lap, and readjusted it. "Go!" She pointed her finger toward the other end of the compartment, and Toutou shambled away cat-fashion. "He will murder you yet, Mr. Nash," she said cheerfully. "And I don't want you to get it into your head that I am going to keep on saving you indefinitely."

She rearranged her hair, picked up her waist and skirt, and put them on as casually as though she was in her boudoir.

"This writing that you found," she resumed her questioning, "is it definite? You may nod or shake your head."

I did neither.

"Very well," she answered patiently. "We will try you further."

And for two hours she shot questions at me, attacking the problem from every conceivable angle, always with her eyes glued on my eyes, always vigilant for any sign of acquiescence or denial. At last Toutou barked an observation at her, and she leaned back a trifle wearily.

"We approach Lyons," she said. "I shall let you go this time, Mr. Nash, principally because if we killed you it might frighten your friends away. Above everything, if we cannot learn the secret first, we must get you to Constantinople."

Toutou took from one of their bags a length of stout rope, and tied my legs from ankle to knee. The train was already whistling for the station yards. Hélène donned hat and furs, and patted my shoulder.

"I wish you were with us, my friend. Ah, well, one wishes for the moon. Be of a stout heart, and remember that Hélène de Cespedes has saved you from the knife. I fancy we shall meet again, and as I said, I cannot promise always to be so kind-hearted."

She let Toutou collect their two bags, saw him to the door and then switched off the single light. They went out, the door closed, and I was in darkness. I strained at my bonds, but without success. Suddenly, the door was reopened. The head of Hélène de Cespedes showed against the lights in the corridor.

"Here is the key to those wristlets," she whispered, sliding it along the seat toward me. "Your friends can unlock them when they find you. I don't believe in being too hard on an enemy—not when you don't have to be. Well, so long, boy."

I chuckled to myself as the door clicked the second time. She was a character, and no ordinary woman, judging by her prowess in curbing Toutou's savage lusts. I was still reflecting on the amazing three hours I had experienced

in that railway compartment, when the brakes took hold, and the train slowed to a stop between the brightly-lighted platforms of the Lyons station. There was the customary clatter of arriving and departing passengers. Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside; a hand wrenched at the door; and a guard bundled in, with two people behind him. As he turned on the light his face was a study in consternation. The two people with him bolted pell-mell into the corridor, shrieking in terror. The guard stood fast, and stared at me, stroking his chin.

"*Sacré bleu!*" he muttered to himself. "Name of a Boche, the mad Englishman was right! I believe they have murdered his friend!"

But then I wriggled to attract his attention to the fact that I was alive, and the consternation on his face changed to cunning.

"But no," he reflected aloud. "It may be this is a criminal. Are there, perhaps, gendarmes in company with it? It is for the *chef de gare*—"

But at that moment Hugh, attracted by the rumpus the two startled passengers were making in the corridor, forced his way into the compartment, shoved the guard headlong on the floor and grabbed me by the arm.

"Are you all right, old man?" he cried. "For God's sake, what have they done with you?"

I motioned to the key on the seat, and he fitted it clumsily to the handcuffs. Nikka and Watkins ran in about this time; the guard regained his feet; the two passengers returned; some more people tried to climb on their shoulders to see what was going on; somebody else fetched the police.

To the latter I told a hasty cock-and-bull story. Bandits had assailed me, searched me for valuables which luckily I did not possess, and left me as I was found. I described Toutou and his companion exactly as they had appeared, sardonically convinced that they would be able to take care of themselves against any detectives the

French provinces could boast; and the police, impressed by Hugh's title and our assertion that we had an important business engagement in Marseilles, placed no obstacles in the way of our departure.

So the express steamed out of Lyons ten minutes late, and Hugh and Nikka and Watkins escorted me back to our own compartment. And when I reached there, and was safe from observation, I jangled the handcuffs before their eyes and lay back and laughed until they thought I was hysterical.

"It may have been funny for you," snapped Hugh. "It certainly wasn't for us. We were just getting ready to unload at Lyons, convinced that you had been thrown or fallen off the train."

"It's funny for all of us," I insisted, wiping the tears from my eyes. "It's a joke—on us. Don't you see it, Hugh? You were claiming that we had shaken them off, that we could sound the 'Stole Away.' And then they ransacked our baggage and kidnapped me on a crowded train. I tell you they are artists. There never was such a gang. And as for Watty's pretty lady, she is the greatest society villainness outside of the movies. Didn't you feel like a cur when she stood there in the door pulling her poor little undies together, with the hair tumbled in her eyes?"

"I'll say I did," answered Hugh with feeling. "That's score for them again."

Nikka grinned at both of us.

"Don't be downhearted, you chaps. The law of averages works in these affairs as in everything. And anyhow, I've got a plan."

CHAPTER XI

WE SPLIT THE SCENT

NIKKA'S plan was simple enough. "When I was a boy and traveled with the tribe," he said, "and we wished to cross a frontier without being bothered by the Customs officers or the Royal foresters, we divided into two parties and struck off for our destination by two different routes."

Hugh nodded.

"I see. You split the scent."

"Exactly. Our trailers are experts, as I told you chaps they would be. If you will take my advice, you will adopt Gypsy tactics against them. Confuse them, string out their pursuit—and then, perhaps, we can baffle them."

"I think you're right," answered Hugh. "What do you say, Jack?"

"Suits me," I agreed. "Nikka obviously knows more about this kind of game than we do."

"I've had experience," replied Nikka simply. "Besides, it's in my blood. Ever since we embarked on this expedition I have felt the old Gypsy strain in me clamoring for the open road. Toutou's gang are using Gypsies. Very well, let us use Gypsies."

"But how can we?" interrupted Hugh.

"My name still means something to my people," said Nikka with that mediæval sang-froid which had amazed me once before. "My father's tribe will fight for me. But in the first place, this is what I suggest. Instead of sailing for Constantinople by the Messageries Maritimes from Marseilles, let us take the train to Brindisi. Our trailers will expect us either to sail on the Mes-

sageries packet or else go by rail to Belgrade and connect with the Orient Express for Constantinople.

"By going to Brindisi we shall surprise them, and perhaps disarrange their plans. Mind you, I don't expect to throw them off; but they will be uncertain. At Brindisi we can connect with a boat for Piræus. When we board that boat they will begin to believe that they understand our plans, because at Piræus one finds frequent sailings for Constantinople. And we shall book passage from Piræus for Constantinople, as they expect. But after we have gone aboard with our baggage, Jack and I will leave the boat by stealth."

"How are you going to manage all that?" I interrupted.

"You can always bribe a steward," returned Nikka. "It will be for Hugh and Watkins to keep the enemy's attentions occupied. They can engage in conversations with us through the door of our stateroom, and that sort of thing."

"But what then?" demanded Hugh. "You divide forces. That makes each party half as strong as we are now."

"There'll be no harm in that," Nikka reassured him. "Our shadows will soon find out that Jack and I are not on the Constantinople boat, and they won't venture to touch you and Watkins until they have located us—which I assure you they won't be able to do."

"Why not?"

"Jack and I are going to take another boat for Salonika, and from Salonika we shall go by train to Seres in the eastern tip of Greek Macedonia. At Seres—and I don't expect them to be able to trail us there—Jack and I will disappear. We shall cease to exist. There will be two additional members in the band of Wasso Mikali, my mother's brother, and that band will be traveling to Constantinople with horses from the Dobrudja to trade with officers of the Allied detachments in the city."

"And Watty and I?" questioned Hugh.

"You go to the Pera Palace Hotel. Meet this Miss King and her father, but don't let anybody suspect that you expected to meet them. Remember, you will be watched all the time. Your rooms and your baggage will be searched. I think they will investigate the Kings, too. Yes, that is likely. You must have Miss King hide the copy of the Instructions you sent her. Not in her trunks—ah, I have it! Let her place it in an envelope, addressed to herself, *Poste restante*. She can go to the Post Office and collect it whenever we need it.

"You and Watkins will not be in any danger. Toutou's people will be too busy trying to find Jack and me. They will be suspecting that you are simply bait to distract their attention—which will be quite correct. But you must be careful not to venture around the city without plenty of company. Take an Allied officer with you whenever you can. You might use the daylight hours to find the site of the Bucoleon."

"Professor King can help them there," I interrupted. "He knows old Constantinople quite well."

"Excellent," applauded Nikka. "But remember, Hugh, I said 'daylight hours.' Don't venture around indiscriminately, and don't go anywhere, even in the daylight, without several other people. The larger your party, the safer you will be against accidents—and it is an accident, rather than a deliberate attack, you will have to guard against."

"But how are we going to get in touch with you?" asked Hugh.

"Leave that to us," replied Nikka, with his quiet grin. "Make it a custom to lounge in front of the Pera Palace every morning after breakfast for half an hour; and keep a watch out for Gypsies. You'll be seeing them all the time, of course, but don't let on that you're interested in them. Some morning two especially disreputable

fellows will come by, and one of them will contrive to get a word with you. Follow them."

"That's a corking plan," Hugh approved warmly. "Well, lads, we'll be in Marseilles early in the morning. Shall we nap a bit?"

If we were followed in Marseilles, we didn't know it. We only left the railroad station to get breakfast and dispatch a telegram from Nikka to his uncle—or, rather, to an address in Seres which acted as a clearing-house for the operations of this particular Gypsy band. Then we took the train for Milan, and stopped off over-night to secure some sleep. The Italian railways were never very comfortable, and the War did not improve them.

We figured, too, that by stopping at Milan we might additionally confuse our shadows, as the city was a natural point of departure for Belgrade. But the first person I saw in the Southern Express restaurant-car was Hélène de Cespedes. She had discarded her black dress for a modish costume with furs, and sat by herself in dignified seclusion, looking at once smartly aristocratic and innocently lovely. She greeted me with a smile, and crooked her finger.

"Don't you 'ave nothing to do with 'er, Mister Jack," breathed Watkins explosively from the rear of our group. "That's 'er!"

"Is that the pretty lady?" whispered Hugh. "My word, Watty, I'll forgive you! Jack, you hound, introduce us. She looks better than she did the other night!"

I looked at Nikka.

"It's a good plan to know your enemies," he said. "They already know us. It can't do any harm for us to know them."

Hélène gave us a charming smile.

"I'm delighted to meet you boys," she said. "And dear old Watkins! We're quite friends, aren't we, Watkins?"

Watkins mumbled something that I fear was scarcely courteous.

"You can introduce me as the Countess de Cespedes, if you like, Mr. Nash," she continued. "I wonder if you knew Cespedes, Mr. Zaranko? He was a rotten old duffer, but he took me off the stage."

"I've heard of him," said Nikka, smiling. "Didn't he leave you anything to keep you going?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Other girls had the pickings before I met him. There was nothing left for me but the name."

"Is that the only one you use?" asked Hugh.

"Oh, come, now," she remonstrated. "There's a flag of truce up. Really, though, if you mention our opposition, I ought to compliment you on your work so far. I believe you might elude any mob but ours."

"We'll leave the decision on that point to the future," smiled Nikka. "By the way, how did you come to get into this game?"

She shrugged her shoulders again. She was an odd mixture of Latin grace and American ease.

"It's the sort of thing I do best. My folks were Wops of some kind. I was born in New York. I went with crooks after I left school. Then I joined the Follies, and a broker cottoned to me. He educated me, music, languages, all that stuff. I went to Paris with him. When we broke off, I tried the stage there. It was just before the War. I was only a kid still, and Cespedes fell for me. After he croaked I tried a bit of everything. For a while I worked for the Austrians—"

"Spy?" questioned Nikka.

"Sure. There's no harm in mentioning it now, and anyway, I was never caught. That was how I happened to meet Serge and Sandra; they were in Toutou's mob. I needed money; he needed brains and a doll-baby face."

"You seem to have a grip on him," I said. "But I

don't see how you can stand the beast. He gives me the creeps."

She eyed me curiously.

"I'm not afraid of him," she answered indifferently. "Most women are attracted by him, you know. You haven't seen his other side."

"I don't want to."

"I hope you don't," she agreed. "Say, did you know you made quite a hit with Sandra, Mr. Nash?"

Hugh and Nikka laughed. I flushed.

"Oh, you needn't flare up," she said. "I can see why you did. You boys are a good bunch of sports. I wish we didn't have to trim you."

"Why do it, then?" asked Hugh.

"I don't sell out," she answered curtly. "Get that straight, Lord Chesby. Since I was a kid, I've had to fight my own way. As near as I can make out, the kind of people who are called respectable and honest are only cleverer crooks than the rest of us. I'm out to make all I can in my own way, and I play according to the rules of my mob."

"You called us good sports," Nikka pointed out.

It was her turn to flush.

"Call it a woman's soft heart," she returned. "Honestly, I get fed up on this life once in a while. If I could have married a decent Wop back in New York, and had a few kids and worked my fingers off—Well, I wouldn't have been able to get along without corsets and put it over you the way I did in the Marseilles train the other night, Lord Chesby."

"That may be true," Hugh agreed. "You are the first—ah—"

"Crook," she flashed, with a show of white teeth.

"Thanks for the word. You are the first of your species I've had the pleasure of meetin'. I don't quite see the attraction of the life for you."

"You wouldn't," she replied. "I'm what you English call a wrong 'un. Maude Hilyer thinks that if she and Montey could cash in they would chuck this life and go straight. But I know she's dead wrong. If you're once wrong, you're always wrong. The best thing you can do is to play safe and steer clear of the cops. That's me."

"But I say!" Hugh objected. "You say everybody is crooked, and next you say—"

"Never mind what I say," she interrupted. "You aren't going to reform me. And I'm against you. And if I can trim you I'll do it, and if Toutou wants to knife you, and it won't interfere with the game, why, I'll let him go ahead. And with it all, I like you. Now, do you understand me?"

"Yes," said Hugh, smiling. "I once met a very gallant Bavarian gentleman between two sets of barbed wire to arrange about burying some dead soldiers, and we found we liked each other very much. But afterward we tried hard to kill each other, and I am afraid I succeeded."

"You've got me," she assented. "Well, you must be hungry, boys. You don't want to save a lot of trouble, and maybe your lives, by giving up that treasure secret, I suppose?"

"No, thanks, Countess," laughed Hugh. "We'll give you a bit of a run for your money yet."

She laughed back with that pleasant, well-bred trill of a carefree schoolgirl, and we bowed and left her.

The next time we saw her she was standing by the gangplank of the steamer at Brindisi.

"Aren't you going on with us?" I hailed her.

"No, Mr. Nash. I'm leaving you in competent hands. Good lord, boy, you can't dodge us. We've got a system—well, the late well-known Czar might have been proud to own it. Be good, and give up before you get hurt."

"That goes for your people, too," I replied a trifle grimly, for I was growing tired of threats.

She waved her hand impatiently, and stepped over to my side. Hugh and the others already were passing up the gangplank.

"Say, boy, I don't want you to get hurt. Neither does Sandra. If anything goes wrong, watch your step. We'll do what we can, but—"

She pivotted on her heel and melted into the crowd. I climbed the gangplank with my chin on my shoulder, and was met with a shower of joshes by Hugh and Nikka.

"Doin' a little missionary work?" inquired Hugh.

"Do you flatter yourself you're aroused the lady's disinterested affection?" asked Nikka.

"No, to both of you," I retorted. "But she—what's the words the novelists use?—oh, yes, she intrigues me."

"She'll intrigue you out of everything you know, if you're not careful," Nikka warned me.

"Remember what she did to Watty," cautioned Hugh.

"The 'ussey!" grunted Watkins, who could never bear to hear her mentioned.

Hugh predicted that we would yet meet her on board, but a diligent search of the vessel failed to reveal anyone, in or out of trousers, who remotely resembled her, and we took account of several blonde northern peasants in our canvass. Also, whoever she had delegated to watch us kept themselves severely in the background. We were not conscious of any espionage.

At Piræus we had a choice of several steamers sailing for Constantinople, none of them Greek, however, as Greece was at war with the Kemalist government which had been set up in Anatolia. Nikka pitched upon a French boat that lay across the wharf from a Greek liner plying to Salonika and the Greek islands of the Ægean. The Frenchman was sailing at dawn the next morning; the Salonika boat was due to cast off several hours later.

We booked two cabins on the Frenchman, and hired a clerk at the British consulate to reserve a cabin and passage for two on the Salonika boat. This arrangement

made, we mustered our scanty baggage, and boarded the Frenchman just before dinnertime. We dined together ostentatiously in the saloon, having publicly concluded a treaty with the purser that we might spend the night on board and so avoid the inconvenience of an early morning start. And after dinner, with many yawns and protestations of weariness, we betook ourselves to bed.

Our cabins were next to each other, and as a matter of fact, we played poker until long past midnight. Then Nikka and I said good-by to Hugh and Watty, and sneaked out into the companionway. Several sleepy stewards eyed us, but there were no passengers about. The quartermaster on guard at the gangway we handed a Napoleon, telling him we were obliged to land in order to dispose of some forgotten business. The watchman on the pier was conciliated in the same way. And finally, the deck-guard of the Greek liner, once his fingers were greased and our tickets shown to him, offered no objection to escorting us to our cabin.

At dawn we were awakened by the whistling of the Frenchman as he backed out from the pier, and from a porthole we watched him disappear in the mist of the harbor. At noon the *Epaminondas* likewise cast off, and Nikka and I thankfully abandoned our battles with the cockroaches that fought with us for possession of the bunks, and ascended to the deck.

Nikka sniffed the air as we stepped from the saloon companionway.

"It's good to be out of that stink below," I remarked with feeling.

"I am trying to smell an enemy," he answered curtly.

"To smell—" I hastily checked my temptation to ridicule him, remembering that occasionally Nikka was startlingly metamorphosed in to a creature of primordial instincts. "Oh," I said lamely, "and—er—do you?"

"No," he said seriously. "It is as Hugh said. We have split the scent. They are at fault."

CHAPTER XII

THE BALKAN TRAIL

AT Salonika we entered a Europe which was new to me, if an old story to Nikka, a Europe which was blended with the life and color and form of the Orient. Tall minarets like fingers of doom pointed skyward over bulbous domes, and driving to the railroad station through blocks of shabby houses that had replaced an area ravaged by fire, we heard the high-pitched, wail-call of the muezzin.

Jews in long, black gaberdines: Albanian Arnauts, Tosks, Ghegs and Malissori tribesmen, stately and savage; Greek mountaineers in the dirty, starched fustenella; tall Serb peasants, with the bearing of nobles and the faces of poets; Bulgars, stolid, imperturbable and level-eyed; hawk-nosed Ottoman Turks in tasseled fezzes; Armenians, fawning and humble; lank, hungry Syrians; treacherous-looking Greeks of the Peninsula; Greeks of the Islands, beautiful as statues by Phidias; Roumanians, with heavy black brows and the stocky build of Trajan's legionaries; Tziganes, lean and gaudily dressed; Kurds with cruel eyes and the bow-legs of a race of horsemen;—all the races of the Near East swarmed and crowded and cursed and pushed along the untidy sidewalks.

"This is No Man's Land," said Nikka as our dilapidated automobile forced a slow progress through the congested traffic. "All races here hate one another. We are two hundred years behind western Europe. Here treachery is the rule. Might is right. The strong hand takes all. Women are inferior beings—save amongst my own race."

His thin face lit with a smile.

"Many things can be said against my people, but we give our women freedom. Yet over us, as over all the other peoples, still hangs the shadow of Islam, shutting out the sun, denying culture, restricting thought."

At the railroad station we fought for places in a first-class compartment, which had room for six and must accommodate eight. The second and third-class cars were jammed to the doors. Women wept, children howled and men swore and struck each other and their women indiscriminately. In the midst of it all, with one warning whistle-blast, the train lunged out of the station, shaking off superfluous passengers as it jolted over the switch on to the main line.

That was a dreadful journey, not long as regards distance, but tediously protracted in time. The country grew steadily more mountainous as we left the coast. The engine panted and heaved; the cars rattled and shook. At frequent intervals we stopped by some station, and the scenes of our departure from Salonika were repeated according to scale. But the engine toiled on, and in the full tide of hours we crawled over a mountain-ridge and saw the sun rising in the east beyond the close-packed roofs of Seres.

It was a town that seemed to huddle together as though in fear, and there were great gashes and gaps in its lines of white-washed house-walls, relics of three wars, each of which had taken toll of its citizens. Here and there a church or a mosque, a school or a government building, rose above the level of two-story dwellings. But it had none of the teeming squalor and gorgeous conflict of colors that made Salonika so effective a gateway.

Nikka commandeered a fiacre in the station-square.

"Do you know the house of Kostabidjian the money-lender?" he asked the driver in Greek that sounded more than passable to me. "Very well, then, drive us there."

"Who is Kostabidjian?" I inquired as the driver whipped up his small horses.

A dour, secretive look had settled on Nikka's face in the last two days. His eyes had narrowed, and their gaze was fixed upon the far horizon when they were not shrewdly surveying the appearances of people around him.

"He is the agent of the tribe," he replied shortly. "It was through him I sent word to my uncle."

I held my peace after that. We drove for half an hour into the northeastern suburbs, where the houses became little villas, with courtyards and small gardens, and sometimes orchards behind. At last we stopped at a gateway overhung by olive-trees, and the driver got down to pull the bell-wire which protruded from an opening by the gate. The solemn clangor echoed faintly, and was succeeded by shuffling foot-steps. A wicket opened, and a dark, be-whiskered face was revealed. Nikka ejaculated a single sentence in the Gypsy dialect that Toutou's gang sometimes used, and the gate swung ajar. I gave the driver of the fiacre a couple of drachmas, and followed Nikka inside.

The individual with the whiskers, a dried-up, elderly man, quickly fastened the gate again, with a sidewise look at Nikka, half respect, half fear. The courtyard was empty, save for some ponies and mules under a shed at the rear, and the custodian motioned to us to follow him to the house.

At the door, he stood aside and ushered us into a parlor furnished in the French style. Off it opened a dining-room. A stout, smooth-faced, elderly man rose from a desk as we entered. He started to salaam, thought better of it, and offered his hand, which Nikka grasped perfunctorily. Then he commenced to speak in the Tzigane dialect, and Nikka cut him off.

"Speak French," said Nikka curtly. "I have no secrets from my friend, Mr. Nash." And to me: "This is Monsieur Kostabidjian."

Kostabidjian bowed to me.

"My poor home is honored, indeed, by two such distinguished guests," he protested. "Monsieur Zaranko, it

is many years now since I had the pleasure of meeting you, but you will find that I have executed all your commissions faithfully."

Nikka smiled sarcastically.

"You would not be alive and whole if you had not," he commented.

"Surely, you do not mean that you think I would do anything else," cried Kostabidjian.

"I mean I am sure that you do as I command," returned Nikka impatiently. "Also, that I feel I do not have to rely upon your honesty in the matter. Now, what news have you for me?"

Kostabidjian—he was an Armenian of uncertain parentage, I afterwards discovered, with the ingrained servility pounded into that unfortunate race by centuries of oppression—drew up chairs for us.

"The telegram was forwarded at once to the Chief," he answered. "But Wasso Mikali sent back word yesterday that he would be delayed in waiting upon you in consequence of a caravan of cartridges which the band are running into Albania. It is an affair which has attracted his attention for the past month, and he dares not trust the work to another."

"Does he, himself, go to Albania?"

"No, Monsieur Zaranko. But the starting of the caravan, and the paying of the purchase-price—"

"In advance?"

"Of course."

"Good," said Nikka. "When will he be here?"

"He spoke of to-morrow—"

"Then serve us food, and lead us to a room where we may rest."

The Armenian clapped his hands, and the old man with the whiskers—who was dumb in consequence of having had his tongue cut out in one of the Turkish massacres of the red past—returned and carried word in his own fashion of our wants to the kitchen. Presently we sat down in the

dining room to a hot meal of pilaf, with chicken, dough cakes and coffee, which Kostabidjian pressed upon us officiously.

"It has been a hard year for the tribe, Monsieur Zaranko," he purred, rubbing his hands together. "I don't know what they would have done without your aid."

"The subject is not for discussion," rapped Nikka.

"Oh, ah! Certainly!"

And he was quiet for a few minutes. Then his loquacity gained the better of him, and he burst forth:

"It's not as it used to be in the Balkans, gentlemen! The law doesn't run any stronger. I'll say that. And boundaries are still vague, for all that the great ones in Paris decided. But people are poor as Hajji Achmet after he'd been to Mecca. They earn nothing, and have nothing—and therefore there's nothing to take or to steal. Hee-hee-hee!"

"You talk nonsense," said Nikka savagely. "Am I to be annoyed by such as you?"

No prince could have been more arrogant; no lackey could have succumbed more completely.

"P-p-par-d-dd-don!" The Armenian's teeth rattled. "I—I—"

"You may go. I will summon you if I have need."

The man went like a whipped dog, and cowered over his mysterious accounts at the desk in the next room.

Nikka sat through the meal with a black frown on his face. He was plainly out of sorts, and while I could understand his aversion to Kostabidjian, I was secretly amazed by the constantly growing change in his manner, for he was normally of a uniformly pleasant disposition. But it was not until we had been shown to a bedroom on the upper floor that he unmasked his feelings. I began to undress, but he paced the floor restlessly from wall to wall. Suddenly he turned on me:

"Jack, I hope I haven't insulted you in the past twenty-four hours."

"I'm not aware of it, if you have," I returned cheerfully.

"I'm having a hell of a time," he groaned. "The two selves in me are wrenching at my soul. There's Nikka, the Gypsy freebooter, who has been dead for years, and against him fights Nikka, the artist and man of the town. Neither of them owns me. Until the other day—except now and then when the old self reared its head temporarily—I thought I had thrust the Gypsy behind me. But I was a fool to think so, Jack. God, what a fool! Why, the music in me always was Gypsy!

"But I thought I had submerged it, drowned it. I thought I was like you and Hugh. I know better now. Since we started east I have felt these half-dead instincts rising up in me, clutching at my soul, tormenting my intelligence. The hunger for the open road, contempt for order and law, the mastery of my own will, all these things call to me. And yet, Jack, I feel ashamed! I feel ashamed to bring you here, to have you meet the fellow downstairs, who, when all is said and done, is the agent through whom my people dispose of what they steal and smuggle.

"For that's the truth, Jack! My people are not like Toutou's gang. But they are Gypsies. They live by their own hands, and every man's hand is against them. They make their own laws, and abide by their own customs. They take what they need, and consider it their due. Kostabidjian spoke of my uncle's running cartridges to Albania. I know what it means. After the War there were vast stocks of ammunition scattered all over the Balkans, treasure trove to such wild peoples. The Allies ruled that it should be surrendered or destroyed. But do you suppose it was? Never!

"It was stolen, hidden and smuggled. I would swear that my tribe have sold it to Kemal Bey, to the Russian Soviets. Now, the Greeks and the Serbs are pressing down on the Albanians, and my uncle sells to the Albanians.

If he can, too, he will sell to the Greeks and the Serbs; and he will take—steal, if you like—whatever of value he can get from all three of them.

"I tell you all this because I don't want to fly false colors with you. I lived that life when I was a boy. But I should like to make you understand that in some way, by some esoteric, involved, well-nigh impenetrable process of psychology, it is not stealing in the sense that Toutou steals. My people have been outcasts for centuries; they have been bred up in this way of life. It is as natural for them to take what they need, and thrive on other people's needs, as it is for the Arabs to practice the same methods in battling the hardships of the desert.

"It isn't wrong in their eyes. Put it that way. And I—I can see it both ways, Jack. I can see how wrong it is, and I can see how right it seems to them."

I dropped my hand on his shoulder.

"You don't need to say all this to me," I told him. "Why, Nikka, it's—it's—"

"It's what? Hard to understand!"

"Easy to understand," I corrected. "Hard to phrase. But I know you too well to worry about you. As for the wrench, I'm beginning to feel it myself."

Nikka resumed his restless pacing.

"I don't mind anything so much as that oily Armenian downstairs," he insisted. "He—he is dishonest. And we make him dishonest. Not that I've used him so, Jack. Most of what I earn goes to my people, who need it, poor souls, especially since the War laid its blight on all south-eastern Europe. Kostabidjian is one of the agents I employ to distribute my funds. I use him because of his connection with my uncle's tribe."

"Most of us have to use dishonest helpers occasionally," I said. "I'd hate to have to guarantee every business associate of mine. But can we trust this man, Nikka? If he's all you indicate him, isn't he likely to sell us out?"

"He'd sell us out in a minute, if he dared," rejoined

Nikka, with a tight-lipped smile. "But he knows that if he did he would get a knife in him. It would be only a question of time."

"Nice company you've dragged me into," I grumbled. "Well, let's catch up on our sleep."

His outburst had eased Nikka's nervous tension, and he soon dozed off. For a while I watched the afternoon sunlight outside the windows, then the weariness of our travels overcame me, and I, too, slept. . . . I woke abruptly, feeling a light blazing in my eyes. My first thought was of Toutou and Hélène de Cespedes, and I dived under the pillow for my automatic and sat up at the same time.

A man was standing in the doorway of the room, with a kerosene lamp in his hand, a tall man, with the proud face of an eagle. Wisps of silver-white hair escaped from the varicolored turban that wrapped his brows, but he held himself with the erect poise of youth. He was dressed in tight breeches of brown cloth, and a blue shirt and short red jacket. Flat sandals of bull's-hide, sewed to a point at the toes, were laced over his bare feet by straps that wound across his insteps and above his ankles. Around his waist was twisted a heavy sash, bristling with knives and pistols.

As I prodded Nikka awake, he closed the door behind him and set the lamp on a table, calmly ignoring my pistol. Nikka, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, took one look at the apparition and jumped from the bed.

"Wasso!" he cried.

The stranger raised fingers to lips and breast in a graceful salaam, and replied in the Gypsy patois, a cadenced, musical speech when used by those to whom it was a mother-tongue. Nikka grasped his hand, and exchanged a rapid-fire of question and answer, then called to me:

"This is my uncle. He arrived sooner than he expected. He guessed my need was great, and traveled without respite. Come and meet him."

Wasso Mikali rendered me a salaam and a handshake. His bright eyes surveyed my face, and he made a comment which drew a laugh from Nikka.

"My uncle thinks you have the look of one who likes to know how many cartridges his enemy carries," Nikka translated.

The old Gypsy sank to his haunches on the bare floor, with a sweeping gesture of invitation to both of us to join him.

"No, no," exclaimed Nikka as I started for a chair. "He has never sat on a chair in his life. Do as he does or he will think you are trying to demonstrate how different you are."

So I crouched cross-legged beside them—it seemed to be easy enough for Nikka to resume the ways of his boyhood—and concealed my discomfort as stoically as I could. It was close to midnight when we were awakened, and the talk with Wasso Mikali lasted for several hours. First, Nikka explained to him the circumstances of our trip to Constantinople, and the old man's eyes glistened at the mention of the treasure. He interrupted with a liquid flow of polysyllables.

"He says," Nikka interpreted, when he had finished, "that he has heard about it. It is just as I told you and Hugh, the tradition is known all through the Balkans. He says that the treasure is concealed in an ancient palace in Stamboul which has been inhabited longer than men can remember by a tribe of Gypsies whose chief is one Beran Tokalji. He says that this Tokalji is a great thief—" Nikka grinned ruefully—"that comes well from my uncle, Jack, and that there is a rumor amongst the tribes that he, Tokalji, is an ally of a group of Frank thieves. There is a tradition in Tokalji's tribe that their forefathers believed the treasure ultimately would go to them."

"Will he help us?" I asked eagerly.

Nikka gave me an odd look.

"His tribe are mine. My wish is their wish. How can they refuse?"

"Yes," I insisted, "but how much will they want? Is it safe to tell him all this?"

Nikka's face flushed purple. For a moment I thought he would strike me. Then he turned, and shot a question at the old Gypsy, who replied with an amused grin.

"I did not repeat your second question," said Nikka coldly. "He would not have taken it in good grace even from me. But I did tell him your first. Do you want to know just what his answer was?"

"Yes," I said, "and I say, Nikka, don't be uppish because I don't know the ropes about your damned family. Man dear, this is all new to me!"

Nikka relented at once.

"My fault," he apologized, slightly shamefaced. "This Gypsy complex I told you about plays funny tricks with me. But—" and his grin duplicated Wasso Mikali's—"My uncle's precise answer to your first question was that he would consider 'the spittle of his sister's son ample payment for whatever he could do.' He meant it, too."

CHAPTER XIII

THE ROAD TO STAMBOUL

WASSO MIKALI was a very wise man. He questioned Nikka closely concerning our situation, and this was his verdict:

"When you fight with thieves you must use thieves' tricks. You did right to come to me. Now I will secure fitting garments for you, my sister's son, and for your Amerikansky friend, Jakka. For him also I will brew a dye of walnut bark and chestnut leaves that will make him as dark as our people, so that men will not turn and stare at him on the road.

"After that I think we had best go away from this place as soon as possible. You have traveled rapidly and shaken off your enemies' pursuit. It is well to take every advantage of an opportunity. Moreover, we must go across the Rhodopes to the place where the tribe have hidden some horses we got from a Roumanian boyar. We will collect the horses, together with some of my young men who can handle a knife, and go on to Stamboul. All men go to Stamboul, and who will notice a Tzigane band?"

"But it was not my thought that you should abandon the affairs of the tribe, and come and fight with me," remonstrated Nikka.

"Are you not the son of my sister?" rejoined the old Gypsy. "If you had not elected to go to Buda with your violin would you not be chief of the band? Do I not stand in your place? Well, then, light of my eyes, we will do for you all that we may."

And he produced a battered silver tobacco box, and rolled himself a cigarette, sitting back on his haunches with

the lithe grace of a cat. Nikka flung me a proud glance as he translated the pledge.

"It's all right," I admitted with due humility. "And I was all wrong, but I didn't know the Middle Ages were still with us."

Nikka laughingly repeated my remark, and his uncle's twinkling eyes and mocking smile conveyed his retort before it was translated:

"Say to my young friend Jakka that if a tribe cannot stand by their own then these days are worse than the old times."

With that he left us, and Nikka and I secured another hour's sleep. When he returned he was accompanied by a younger edition of himself, who carried two bundles which were disclosed as complete suits of Tzigane dress. He, himself, carried a pot of warm, brown liquid, and he proceeded to apply the stain to me with a small paintbrush. Hair, mustache, face and body were darkened to a mellow brown. The stuff dried quickly, and I was soon able to pull on the strange garments, which Nikka showed me how to adjust and fasten.

I could not help laughing at my reflection in the mirror of the cheap French bureau de toilette. The tight trousers, the short jacket and the big turban increased my height, and the gaudy colors of turban and waist-sash gave me a bizarre appearance that was startlingly unfamiliar. I felt uncomfortable, as though I had dressed for a fancy-dress ball, and overdone the part. But there was none of this effect in Nikka's get-up. With the donning of his Gypsy costume he discarded his last visible link with the West. He looked the Gypsy, the Oriental, a kingly vagabond.

"You belong," I said. "But I feel like an imposter."

"You'll grow used to it," he answered, folding in the ends of his sash. "Did they give you a knife?" I exhibited the horn-handled, eight-inch blade, with its sheath hooked to a leather belt that encircled my waist beneath

the sash. "Good! Got your automatic and spare clips?"

"And these clothes?"

I pointed to the civilized garments we had discarded.

"Kostabidjian will send them on to Constantinople in a few days." He sighed. "Personally, Jack, I don't care if I never wear them again. I can earn a thousand dollars an hour with my fiddle, but what's it worth compared with this? Rawhide on your feet that flexes with your soles; clothing that covers you, but doesn't bind; and the open road ahead! Civilization is a fraud, Jack. I was a fool ever to quit the Gypsy life."

"Well, you're back in it again," I replied, "and perhaps you'll be feeling you were a fool to return to it. I know I feel like a fool. Let's go."

It was still dark when we left the house. Kostabidjian and his servant were awaiting us in the courtyard. They had saddled two horses, and a mule was loaded with bulky packs, food, and blankets, tarpaulins and several cooking utensils. The Armenian kept himself in the background. He seemed in deadly fear of Wasso Mikali, who treated him as though he was a cur to be kicked into the gutter if he interfered. And indeed, there was something singularly imposing about the old Tzigane, who strode around with the air of one used to taking as he desired and giving as he pleased.

But just as we were leaving, the dumb servant having swung open the outer door, Kostabidjian mustered sufficient courage to press to Nikka's side.

"Everything was satisfactory?" he inquired timidly. "I have served—"

"Well enough," returned Nikka, swinging into the saddle of one of the horses, "except that you talk too much. Guard your tongue if you would keep it. Your servant there—"

He shrugged significantly. Even by the starlight I could see the pallor that blanched the Armenian's face. He took the threat in sober earnest.

"You shall have no cause to blame! All shall be as you wish. I will remit the charges for the last distribution. Take your horse, Monseigneur, both horses—the mule! Take all!"

Nikka gave him a single look, and he subsided.

"Heidi, Jakka!" called Wasso Mikali.

"Mount, Jack," added Nikka. "The other horse is for you. We must hasten. My uncle does not like to be seen entering or leaving the town."

We rode out in single-file, first Wasso Mikali, then Nikka, then myself, last the young Tzigane, leading the pack-mule. The Gypsies sat a pace that made the horses trot to keep up with them, a long, slack-kneed shamble, ungainly in appearance, but tremendously effective. By sunrise we had left the town behind the first mountain-ridge, and were heading north towards the waste of mountains that fringed the Bulgarian frontier. Hour after hour we plodded along. More than once I suggested a rest, for I knew our escorts had been afoot all night. But they would not hear of it. Neither would they consent to sharing the horses with us turn-about, and in this Nikka upheld them.

"Our feet are soft," he pointed out. "We could never maintain such a speed, and it is best to put as long a distance as possible between us and Seres, lest our trailers should pick up the scent."

During the early part of the day we passed frequent villages, melancholy collections of hovels that had been scorched by the awful visitation of wars the Balkans had known for a decade. But in the afternoon we departed from the main road, and struck off across the hills. Occasionally we saw farmhouses or sheepfolds, but when night came we made camp in a lonely ravine with the stars for roof. There was not a light on the horizon, not even the barking of dogs to indicate a human habitation.

The next day it was practically the same. The trail we followed was a mere trace that sometimes disappeared. Toward evening we entered a vast forest, and finally halted

on the banks of a stream where a campfire blazed. Against the flames showed gaunt, turbaned figures.

"Are these our friends?" I asked.

"They are Pomaks," said Nikka.

He spat contemptuously.

"What—"

"Moslems! Swine!"

While Wasso Mikali and the young Tzigane, whose name was Sacha, made the fire under a bowlder, Nikka and I led our tired animals down to the stream to drink. Several of the Pomaks, dirty, shifty-eyed fellows in the same gaudy raiment that the Tziganes affected, lounged up to us. One of them stepped in Nikka's path, and Nikka promptly kicked him. The man turned like a flash, his knife out, and Nikka dropped the bridle he was holding, and closed with him. Two of the Pomaks jumped for me, knives wheeling.

I did what I had done in the fight in the Gunroom, hit out with my fists. The first man I knocked into the water, and the second yelled for help, circling me cautiously the while. Nikka, after one click of blades, stabbed his man in the shoulder, and we stood back to back, half a dozen Pomaks pelting up from their fire.

"Wait," said Nikka, as I drew my automatic.

There was a scurry in the shadows, and Wasso Mikali thrust his way into the group surrounding us. He said nothing, but stood there where they could see him in the firelight, and they muttered together and slunk away, the man Nikka had wounded clutching his bloody arm.

"What is your uncle? A justice of the peace?" I inquired facetiously.

"He is Wasso Mikali," answered Nikka, wiping his knife-blade on the grass. "Now I feel better, Jack. It is still the same. The Pomak curs crawl to heel when the Gypsy speaks. I wondered if it could be just as in my boyhood, after all that has happened in the world."

"If you ask me," I returned, "I don't believe anything has happened in this world of yours."

"Much has happened. But the Gypsy is always the same—and so likewise, it seems, is the Pomak. God, but it felt good to kick that pig!"

I regarded my friend with a recurrence of that amazement which he had stirred in me several times before. The quiet, self-contained musician, the artist, the efficient subaltern of the Foreign Legion, the cultured man-about-town had been replaced by an arrogant forest princeling, savagely contemptuous of all but his own kind.

The Pomaks gave us a wide birth, and early as we were afoot in the morning, they were off before us; but we heard from them again. We were threading a forest defile, where the pine-trees grew thick to the cliff edges, when we heard a shout overhead, I looked up at a stocky man in a brown uniform, with a round fur cap, emblazoned with a rampant lion. He held a rifle in his hands.

"A Bulgarian forester," muttered Nikka.

Wasso Mikali climbed up to the forester's perch, and held a brief conversation with him, at the conclusion of which he dug something bright out of his sash and dropped it in the forester's hand. Then he slid down into the ravine again, and we resumed our journey. The Pomaks had complained to the forester that we were smuggling rose-water essence, but he readily admitted that we were going the wrong way to be handling such a traffic. The lefa piece in his hand was to salve his conscience for not reporting the stabbing of the Pomak by Nikka.

As we progressed that day the mountains became wilder and more barren. Once we saw a lumber-camp on the lower slope of a ridge we traversed. Again, in the early afternoon, I saw what I took to be a castle perched atop of a huge crag miles away across a tumbled mass of peaks. But Nikka explained that it was one of those fortified monasteries which kept the fires of learning alight

during the gloomy centuries when the Turk's rule ran as far as the Danube.

The path we followed was eccentric in the extreme. In fact, there was no path. We climbed a succession of gullies and ravines opening out of one another, and at dusk emerged upon a sheltered valley, buried deep between precipitous slopes draped in a virgin covering of conifers, chestnut and beech. A little rivulet foamed down the middle, dammed at the foot by a crude barrier of rocks. Horses and mules and a few sheep and goats grazed on the banks. Against the mountain-wall on either side were built a number of rough log-shelters, part houses, part caves. Children, naked for the most part, played about. Women were washing in the brook or tending several open fires. A dozen men were lying or sitting on the ground.

"They don't seem surprised to see us," I commented to Nikka, whose brooding eyes were drinking in the picture.

"They know we must be friends," he answered. "Else the lookouts down the path would have signaled them we were coming—and we should not have come," he added with a flitting smile.

"Do you know this place?"

"As well as—how shall I put it?—As well as Hugh knows Castle Chesby. No, I was not born here. My mother lay on the floor-boards of a caravan-cart in the Bukowina. My father was looking for likely ponies to trade with Bulgarian officers. But they brought me back here, and here I grew to boyhood. Do you see that first hovel on this bank? That was where I was taught to fiddle. And there—"

Wasso Mikali, striding in front of us, raised his voice in a great shout, and the men by the houses jumped to their feet and crowded toward us. The old Gypsy added something in which Nikka's name was repeated two or three times, and they cried out in astonishment. In the next moment they were swarming around us, and sinewy hands were clasping ours, rows of white teeth were gleam-

ing in welcoming smiles, and Nikka was being greeted with a heart-warming mixture of affection and respect.

Once they discovered I could not talk their language they let me alone, but Nikka they plied with questions until the women summoned us to the fires for the evening meal. Their attitude toward him was extraordinary. He was one of themselves—several were his cousins, most of them were related to him in some remote degree of consanguinity; he had lived amongst them for years. Yet to them, as to the rest of the world, he was also the great master, the violinist who could charm multitudes, upon whose bounty, too, they and others like them had been sustained in periods of want.

While the women served us with stew and bread, Nikka introduced me to them, and they promptly manifested a naïve interest in my person and career. They all called me Jakka. They were amazed to learn that I made my living by drawing plans of houses for people. Who, they inquired with frank disbelief, needed to have somebody draw for him the plan of his house? It was absurd. You simply took logs and boards or bricks and stone, if you were in a city, and you put them together. They even insisted upon dragging me away from the fire to the nearest house to illustrate what they meant. They were determined to convince me how superfluous was my profession.

I, in my turn, was surprised by the idyllic security of this retired valley, and I asked them, through Nikka, if it had never been penetrated even in wartime. No, they replied, only once a party of Franks in pot-hats—by which, it seemed, they meant Germans—had come upon it by accident, and of the Franks not one had escaped. Of course, occasional attempts had been made to drive them out by other outlaw bands; but none had ever succeeded, in consequence of the vigilance of their watch and the tortuous approach through a network of defiles.

Their community persisted in defiance of civilization, an

anomalous relic of the stone age, of nomad barbarism; and they assured me that here and there all over the Balkans other similar Gypsy communities still held out, in spite of the havoc of destruction wrought by the War.

We remained in the valley for one day, just long enough for Wasso Mikali to pick the six men he intended to take with him, select horseflesh for ostensible trading purposes, and made the necessary arrangements for leaving the tribe so long without his guidance. It interested me that he appointed as sub-chief his wife, a wrinkled old beldame, who boasted a complete mouthful of yellowed teeth and rolled cigarettes with one hand. And it was significant of the conditions under which they lived that we stole away by twilight, so that our exit might not be observed by chance spies of rival bands, who would thus learn of the reduction of their garrison.

Two days' journey to the east carried us into the colorful stream of traffic on a main-traveled highway. Caravans of pack-ponies jingled along. Bands of itinerant Gypsies like ourselves; camel trains, endless processions of ox-carts, and very rarely, an automobile or a fiacre, moved in both direction. Monks from the mountain monasteries looked askance at Pomak and Tzigane. The Balkan races in their varied garb jangled and wrangled by. But not too close to the Greek frontier we swerved into a byway, and gave the custom houses a safe margin.

After that it was the same story for more than a week. True, when we abandoned the mountains and dipped into the rolling plains of Thrace, we left behind us the trappings of barbarism. But the air we breathed and the scenes that unrolled before us belonged to the Orient. We had occasional minor adventures, fights with keepers of roadside khans, disputes with other parties and attempts to steal our horses. But Wasso Mikali was a prince of the road. He met stealth with guile, force with nerve. He was never defeated.

Two hundred and fifty miles we traveled, south and

east, and at last there came a day when we passed the Tchataldya barrier, and from a hillock caught a glimpse of a skyline of towers and floating domes and soaring minarets and beyond them to the right a hint of blue that was the meeting-place of the Bosphorus and the Marmora.

"It looks like a fairy city!" I exclaimed.

"It will stink in your nostrils," replied Nikka curtly.

"It is Stamboul—the last stand of the Turk."

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOUSE IN SOKAKI MASYERI

UNTIL we crossed its very threshold the spell of the city held us. Not even the noisome belt of Russian refugee camps and tawdry villas and the unkempt tombs of the Hills of the Dead could shatter the illusion of that splendid skyline. The nearer we approached, the more impressive it became. The long gray line of the old Byzantine walls, the uneven lift of the roofs staggering up and down its seven hills, the swelling domes of mosque and basilica, the slender beauty of countless minarets, the faultless contour of cypress groves and the far blue gleam of the Golden Horn and the Marmora, with the dim background of the Asiatic hills, all combined to mold a picture of piercing loveliness.

But when we passed through the echoing arch of the Adrianople Gate the spell was broken. Crazy houses topped over the filth of the streets; a dense mass of unwashed humans eddied to and fro; squalor begging description leered from the steep lanes and alleys that branched off from the main streets. A hundred races swarmed about us, vying with one another in wretchedness and misery. Dogs and flies fought in the gutters with children and old people. Beggars whined for baksheesh. Food venders yelled their cries and hawked their unsanitary wares. Every kind of clothing appeared, from greasy European dress to the quaint peasant costumes of south-eastern Europe and Anatolia and all the countries eastwards to the Hindoo Koosh.

It was like one's fancies of the Arabian Nights, and yet unlike them. For here was no lavishness of Oriental dis-

play, no exotic magnificence, only suffering and want and hunger and disease and smells and a dreadful ugliness that was spiritual as well as physical. It was as if a gigantic, cancerous sore, festering and gangrened through the centuries, had eaten away the vitality of what had once been the richest city in the world. And back and forth in that swarm of humanity's dregs wandered men of the civilization which had prospered outside the pale of Islam, French and British officers, bluejackets, poilus, tommies and an occasional tourist, clinging to a smirking guide.

Nikka, riding beside me, viewed the spectacle with cynical detachment.

"Seven hundred years ago," he said, "this was incomparably the stateliest, most powerful city in Christendom. It was the center of an Empire that was still able to stand alone, although it had borne the burden of resisting the Moslem attacks on the Western world for more than five hundred years. It enshrined all that was best and most worthy of the ancient Greek and Roman culture. It had a million inhabitants. It had public services, schools, posts, police, drains, water supply. Life was safe, commercial independence and prosperity assured—which was more than could be said for any other community, East or West."

"And the Turks made it what it is!" I exclaimed, as Wasso Mikali, leading our little procession, turned off the main street we had been following into one of the stinking, littered lanes that twisted down into shadowy regions of corruption.

"Not the Turks! The Turks only finished what others had begun. No, the beginning of what you see around you was made by Hugh's ancestor and his brother knights of the Fourth Crusade, who, instead of fulfilling their vows to journey to the Holy Land, voyaged to Constantinople and overpowered the feeble Emperor of that day, and then sacked and wrecked the city. It was never the same afterward. It never recovered its strength. And when the Crusades finally impelled the concentration of

the Moslem power, it became only a question of time before the city must fall. Had it not been for those walls we just passed, it would have fallen a century before it did. In fact, it fell then mainly because there were not enough men to hold the defenses."

"What you say is interesting," I said. "For after all, we are coming to-day on Hugh's behalf for pretty much the same object as lured his ancestor. We are hunting the treasure of the city."

"But we shall do no harm to any one by taking the treasure," returned Nikka. "What use would it be to these people around us? Would they share it? Never! It would be employed for the pleasures of their masters. The only way to redeem Constantinople is to repopulate."

We plunged deeper and deeper into the dark byways, sometimes traversing streets so narrow that pedestrians were compelled to squeeze themselves flat against the house-walls to permit us to pass. In the twilight it was difficult to see far ahead, and at every corner Wasso Mikali raised his voice in a shout of warning. But at last we rode forth into a wider thoroughfare and stopped opposite the gate of a huge, fortress-like building, whose windowless stone walls towered above the surrounding housetops.

"The Khan of the Georgians," explained Nikka. "Here we shall be swallowed up in an army of travelers. No one would think of looking for us in such a place."

Wasso Mikali made the necessary payment to the porter at the gate, and we rode between the ponderous, steel-bound doors into a courtyard such as you find in a barracks. Around it rose three tiers of galleries, arched in stone, and below them were a succession of stables fronted by sheds and penthouses. Piles of goods lay everywhere, in the courtyard and on the galleries. Horses, mules, oxen and camels neighed, brayed, bellowed and grunted. Men talked in knots on the mucky cobbles of the court, squatted in every gallery or leaned over the railings shouting to each other. Women sat on bales and nursed their infants.

Children ran about with the usual ability of children to escape sudden death in dangerous places. It sounded like a boiler factory and an insane asylum holding a jubilee convention.

But Wasso Mikali and his young men pushed through the confusion with the same bored air I would have worn in bucking the subway rush at Grand Central. They appropriated a corner of a stable, and put up the horses, uncinched the packs and climbed a flight of stone stairs to the second floor, where the old Gypsy rented two cubicles, each lighted by a grated window two feet square and containing nothing except some foul straw, from a custodian who looked like the conception of Noah entertained by the artists of the subscription editions of the Holy Bible.

Nikka had relapsed so thoroughly to Gypsyism that he professed not to be suspicious of the straw, but at my insistence he procured a worn broom from Father Noah and we swept out the room which had been set aside for Wasso Mikali and ourselves. The six retainers in Wasso's train were given the next cubicle, and they promptly piled into it the straw which we had banished from our room, so I doubt whether our labors produced any benefit, as they spent as much time with us as in their own quarters.

Such food as we did not have with us we bought from a general store conducted in an angle of the courtyard, and the cooking was done over a brazier, which, with the necessary charcoal, we rented from Father Noah. When night fell, and the cooking fires blazed out all over the courtyard and in the galleries it was a sight worth coming to Constantinople to see. There was an acrid reek of dung in the air, the sweaty smell of human bodies, the pungent aroma of the charcoal, and an endless babble of voices in a score of tongues and dialects.

Afterward some men on our gallery played on bagpipes. From the courtyard came the twanging of simple stringed instruments, and nasal voices lifted in interminable melancholy songs. A woman who was no better than she

should have been danced in the light of two flaring kerosene torches by the gate until she won the attention of a bandy-legged Turcoman rug-merchant. A thief attempted to pick the purse of a fat Persian. A Kurdish horse-dealer tried to knife a snarling Greek. And gradually the khan's inmates sought their sleep. Most of them lay in the courtyard or stables beside their animals and goods or else on the galleries. The snores of a score resounded into our cubicle. Yet I slept, awakening at intervals of the night when a child cried for the breast or a camel broke loose and threshed around the courtyard or a party of belated travelers stumbled over the sleepers outside our door.

We were astir early in the morning, and before eight o'clock Wasso Mikali, Nikka and I left the khan—Wasso having given strict injunction to his young men to stick to their quarters and discourage any endeavors to make them talk—to cross the Golden Horn to the European quarter of Pera. This walk was no less fascinating than our ride from the Adrianople Gate. It took us through the northeastern half of Stamboul, and after we had passed the lower bridge of boats, into the comparatively civilized conditions of the Galata and Pera areas.

But to tell the truth, once we had left Stamboul Nikka and I thought little of our surroundings. Nikka even relinquished some of the wolfish manner which his return to Gypsy life had inspired, and we discussed eagerly, and not for the first time, the possibility that harm had come to Hugh. But our fears were relieved when we came to the corner of the street opposite the hotel, for there by the entrance stood Hugh and Watkins chatting with Vernon King.

Nikka led the three of us up to the hotel, shambling ungracefully and goggling at the Western aspect of the building and the people who passed on the sidewalk.

"Anybody covering them?" he whispered.

I looked around. On the farther curbstone, smoking and

pretending to be interested in the passers-by, lounged two individuals who might have been cut from the same pattern as ourselves; and I indicated them to Nikka as I offered him tobacco from the box I carried Balkan-fashion in my waist-sash.

"All right," he said, "we must be careful. We'll move up beside Hugh, and when there's nobody in ear-shot you say what you have to say, speaking to me."

We peered open-mouthed into the lobby, gaped at shop-windows and slowly worked to a position close by Hugh and Vernon King. I was amused to observe that Watkins confined his attention to the two spies across the street, whom he favored with a steady, malignant gaze. King, too, was immersed in the conversation. Hugh gave us one keen glance, obviously because we were Gypsies. But he did not recognize us, and indeed, in our gaudy clothes, dirty and unshaven, we looked nothing like his memory of us.

"If they don't come in the next few—" King was saying as we halted close by, staring at a Levantine lady in a Parisian frock who was entering a taxi.

"Better not," warned Hugh, with a wink toward us.

"This is one time we fooled you," I remarked, speaking in a low tone of voice at Nikka—there was nobody else within twenty feet of our groups at the moment. "Jack speaking, Hugh. You and Watty follow us. Go around the block the other way from us. We'll pick you up."

Nikka had a bright thought as we started off. The Commissionaire at the hotel entrance had been watching us with suspicion, and Nikka made a pretense of thrusting by him into the lobby. The Commissionaire grabbed him by the arm, and hustled him on to the sidewalk, and at this we all pretended uneasiness and hurried up the street. Hugh and Watkins watched us disappear, then said good-by to King, and walked down the street. They were rounding the corner of the farther side of the block as we entered it, and when we made sure they had seen us, we

turned into a cross-street that led between buildings toward Galata and the Golden Horn.

Hugh's shadows had a poor time of it after that, and I believe we lost them in the maze of crooked lanes in Stamboul. At any rate, they were nowhere in sight when we dodged into the gateway of the Khan of the Georgians. Hugh was bursting to talk, but Nikka motioned to him to be silent. The appearance of two Europeans like himself and Watkins was bound to attract some attention, and we rushed them through the courtyard as rapidly as possible. Of course, everybody who noticed them at all concluded that they were up to no good, considering the disreputable company they were in.

So they panted after us up the steep stairs to the second gallery, and Wasso Mikali opened the door of our cubicle and stood aside until Watkins had entered. Then he came in, himself, and locked it and squatted down with his back against it. He was as imperturbable as Watkins, which is saying a great deal. Watkins surveyed the room with cool disfavor, drew his finger through a smudge of smoke on the wall and shook his head.

"Dear, dear, gentlemen," he said. "They don't do very well for you 'ere, do they, now? A proper queer place, I call it. And you 'ave changed, too, if I may say so. Mister Jack, sir, you must let me draw you a 'ot tub, and I'll give Mister Nikka a shave."

We shouted with laughter.

"That is supposed to be a disguise, Watty," exploded Hugh. "My word, it's a good one! You lads had me fooled completely. I looked at you just as I've looked at scores of rascals like you, and King and I went on wondering what had become of you. I say, who's the old gent?"

Nikka introduced his uncle, and Wasso Mikali met Hugh with the unstudied courtesy that made it so difficult to remember that he knew nothing of what we call manners or the gentler aspects of life.

"I wish you'd tell him how much I appreciate his assistance," said Hugh. "And I shall be very glad to—"

"Hold on, Hugh," I interrupted. "Remember, he's Nikka's uncle. And besides, he's a king in a small way on his own."

Hugh turned squarely on Nikka.

"My mistake, old man," he said. "I apologize for what I didn't say. But will you please give him my thanks, all the same."

Wasso Mikali's bright eyes, eyes that sparkled with vitality, took on a humorous gleam.

"He says," Nikka translated, chuckling, "that he appreciates your thanks, but he never does anything for thanks. He is here because I am interested and there is a chance of fighting, and he never loses an opportunity to draw his knife, if there is loot to be won or a friend to be aided."

"He's a sportsman," approved Hugh.

"And there are six more like him in the next room," I added.

"I say, Nikka, you brought a feudal levy—what?" Hugh exclaimed delightedly. "Well, we shall need them. This is going to be a tight job, if you ask me."

"Is Toutou here?"

"I think not. So far as we have observed, none of the headliners has appeared on the scene, but the underlings are very efficient. Vernon King and I have been over the ground rather thoroughly. He's been a priceless help, Jack. Don't know what Watty and I would have done without him. He saved us from having to rely on a guide to learn the city. And Betty—she's the most enthusiastic worker on our side."

"She would be," I agreed. "But you don't mean to say that you and she have really done any work?"

"Oh, come, now," he expostulated. "What do you take me for? We have worked a lot. Betty has a motor-launch her father chartered so they could run up and

down the coast on his archæological trips, and we used that to mark down the house where we think the treasure is located."

Nikka and I both forgot our Gypsy stoicism, and hitched forward. We were sitting on the floor; Hugh and Watkins, in recognition of their clean clothes were perched on two packs.

"Have you really got a line on the site of the Bucoleon?" asked Nikka.

"Yes," said Hugh. "Matter of fact, that was comparatively easy, thanks to Vernon King. You see, he knows his Constantinople of old; and after consulting with some other learned Johnnies out at Robert College and several ancient Greeks of the Syllogos, the Historical Society, you know, he was able to point out quite accurately the general site of the Great Palace. When we had gone so far, it became a case of picking out the building within that area that held our prize.

"In that we were helped by knowing that it was occupied by a band of Gypsies, who had lived there a long time. The Phanariots, Greeks of the Syllogos, I mean, picked out the building like a shot. To verify it, we watched it from the street and also from the motor-launch. There isn't any doubt about it. It's in what they call Sokaki Masyeri, a mean little street in a mean quarter that skirts the old sea-walls beyond the railroad tracks.

"This house is built right on the walls. It has a kind of battered magnificence, elaborately carven cornices and window-moldings, and it rambles over a good bit of ground, including a fairish-sized courtyard, just as you would expect of the wreck of an old palace. To be sure, it's no more than a small portion of what was the Palace of the Bucoleon. As Vernon King pointed out, the man who started out to excavate the whole site of the Palace would have to embark in the real estate business on a large scale and work with steam-dredgers."

"And you're positive about all this?" I insisted.

"Oh, lord, yes! There can't be any mistake, Jack. Why, the bird who lives in this house is the king of the Stamboul Gypsies, the chief bad man of Constantinople. He has a whole tribe of cut-throats at his beck and call. Ask anybody here about Beran Tokalji—"

Wasso Mikali leaped to his feet at sound of that name and strode over to us, his hand on his knife.

"What's the row?" inquired Hugh as the old Gypsy and Nikka engaged in a brisk exchange of sibilant phrases.

"Our friend has this person Tokalji's number," I explained. "He told us about him. He had heard about the treasure and the house."

"Then we must be right," cried Hugh.

"You're right enough," agreed Nikka, while Wasso Mikali returned to his place by the door and rolled a cigarette. "It seems, also, that this Tokalji is a particular enemy of my uncle. He was suggesting a little exterminating expedition."

"That's the last move to try," answered Hugh quickly. "We've got to be very careful. The authorities were rather puzzled to account for my continued interest in the city, at first. As it is—"

He turned brick-red to his hair.

"As it is," I grinned, "your pursuit of Bet has material advantages."

"Curse you, Jack," he retorted disagreeably, "that's not the way to put it. And anyhow, I'm not responsible for what damnfool officials think."

"You are in luck," said Nikka with a smile.

Hugh stood up, hot and exasperated.

"I didn't come here to be spoofed by a couple of idiotic rotters," he snapped. "When you find your senses, send for me."

"Oh, hang on to your temper, Hugh," I said, dropping my hand on his shoulder. "Get back to where we were. You said we must play safe. We've got six of Nikka's cousins in the next room, first-class knife-handlers, every

one of them. With Wasso Mikali and us, that makes eleven."

"And Vernon King is twelve," added Hugh. "He wants to be in on the whole business. It appeals to his archæological bump, as well as to his sporting tastes. But we can't have a rough house yet. We don't know the ground well enough. We've got to determine where the treasure is in that house."

"Did you get the copy of the Instructions from Miss King?" asked Nikka.

"Yes, and had her immediately mail it to herself, Poste Restante, as we agreed. It's there now. I don't need it. I found I had memorized it perfectly. No, the next step is to get inside that house, by stealth, if possible, by force, if every other means fails."

CHAPTER XV

WATKINS PLAYS THE GOAT

“WE ought to try to get inside Tokalji’s house as soon as possible, if Toutou and Hélène and the rest of them are not here yet,” said Nikka slowly. “Are you sure about that, Hugh?”

“To the extent that we haven’t seen a sign of them.”

“They will have been scurrying about our back-trail,” I suggested. “Our disappearance must have upset their plans.”

“Probably,” assented Nikka. “Yes, if we are going to profit by that trick we must move soon. I don’t believe either Jack or I could fool that Cespedes woman. At the same time, what Hugh says about the danger of violent tactics is very true. We should keep my uncle and his men as a reserve. If it ever comes to a cold show-down, we are going to need more than ourselves.”

“King and I have talked it over frequently,” said Hugh. “But we haven’t been able to think of a safe way of getting inside. Of course, we could run ashore in the launch some night, and climb up the courtyard wall that fronts on the Bosphorus, but we’d certainly be discovered.”

“It wouldn’t work,” asserted Nikka. “No, to get in and have opportunity to look around for the landmarks mentioned in the Instructions we must be accepted as friends.”

“It can’t be done,” protested Hugh at once.

“Oh, yes, it can. Jack and I can do it—with Watkins to help us.”

Watkins started up from the pack upon which he had been endeavoring to appear comfortable.

"Oh, now, Mr. Nikka! I never 'eard the like! Your ludship, I protest, I do! I wasn't cut out for a Gypsy. Can you see me in such clothes? It's not decent, your ludship, for a man of my years to be going in public dressed like a pantomime."

"We're not going to make a Gypsy out of you, Watty," returned Nikka, waving him to silence. "You are going to be the innocent victim of two outrageous bandits."

"That's worse," groaned Watkins. "I'll do my duty, your ludship, and take what comes, but there's no call for all this wild talk, if I may say so, sir, and what does it all lead to? And I'm mortal sure, your ludship, there's bugs in this room. 'Adn't we better be getting back to the 'Otel, sir?"

"Sit down," commanded Hugh. "Nobody's stuck you up yet. What's your plan, Nikka?"

"Just this. When we leave here you and Watkins head for Tokalji's house. We'll follow you at a distance. You and Watty must prowl through the street as mysteriously as you can, looking up at the house, examining its approaches, all that sort of thing. Make sure the street is empty—"

"Oh, it's always empty," interrupted Hugh. "It's crescent-shaped, with comparatively few houses opening on it, a backwater."

"That helps. Now, when you get into the street look back and you will see us lurking after you. Pretend to be scared. Then we'll go after you, knives out. Run. You get away, Hugh, but we catch Watty and throw him down—"

"Yes, it 'ad to be me, gentlemen," sighed Watkins.

"—empty out his pockets, start to cut his throat—you'd better not be wriggling about that time, Watty, or the knife might slip—and you raise a yell for the police around the corner. We change our minds, kick Watty on his way and run back. At the gate of Tokalji's house we ask for admission, claiming we fear pursuit. I think—I am quite

sure—they will let us in. It is a chance we must take. They will have seen what we did, and from what you and Wasso Mikali tell me, Tokalji considers himself the chief of the local criminals. He will demand a percentage of our loot, and let it go at that.”

“A nice time will be ’ad by all,” commented Watkins.

“It sounds simple,” I said. “But what about me?”

“You are a Frenchman, an ex-Apache and deserter from the Salonika troops. Let me do the talking. I know Gypsies. If you tell them a bold tale, and carry a high bluff, they will take you at your own valuation.”

“It’s a plan worth trying,” agreed Hugh. “But you can’t expect to stay with Tokalji forever.”

“I know that. We’ll do the best we can.”

“Start now?”

“Wait until afternoon. That will drive your shadows insane, and they will be doubling back to the hotel on the chance of picking you up again.”

We spent the balance of the time together hashing over our experiences, and horrifying Watkins by revealing to him the state of our apparel. Incidentally, we arranged to have complete changes of European clothes sent to us at the khan, so that if it became necessary we could shift rôles inside the protecting walls of the great caravanserai.

When the hour came to leave, Wasso Mikali and his young men escorted Hugh and Watkins through the courtyard, and Nikka and I followed at some distance. The Gypsies stopped in the gateway, and we strolled on alone after our friends in the direction of the Bosphorus. We had walked for upwards of an hour along the narrow lanes, up-hill and down-hill, elbowing a passage through the sordid stream of life, when from an elevation we glimpsed the sheen of water, and Hugh, a hundred feet in front of us, tossed his head as if in invitation to press on.

We accepted the hint, and as they rounded an alley-corner into a dingy lane that was over-topped midway by a wall of massive Roman construction we were close at their

heels. Now the comedy began. Hugh played up in great shape. He drew a paper from his pocket, and affected to stare along the wall. He counted his steps. He looked around him fearfully. He conferred with Watkins, who manifested even more uneasiness. It was Watty who looked behind them, and spied us, peering around a flair of stonework. It was Watty, too, I am bound to say, who undertook to measure the height of the wall by contrast with his own stature—at least, he appeared to be doing so. Afterwards he denied that he had had any thought of this. He was only trying to get as far away as possible from us—we “fair gave ’im the creeps.”

We slunk into the alley in as hangdog a manner as we could manage. Watty called Hugh’s attention to us, as we thought, with genuine dramatic art. We heard later that he remarked: “It ain’t right, your ludship, these carryings-on! I don’t ’old for me own skin, but there’s Mister Jack and Mister Nikka little knowing what they’ll be getting theirselves into.” To which Hugh says he replied: “Steady on, old Boot-trees! England expects every man to take his beating.”

Anyhow, as Nikka whipped out his knife and ran for them, Watty squeaked, and lit off with a considerable lead on Hugh. But Hugh wasted no breath. He sprinted and lunged into Watkins, knocking him against a house-wall, so that we had time to catch up. And as Hugh reached the curve of the crescent-shaped street, Nikka overhauled Watkins and toppled him over with every appearance of ruthless brutality. In the next moment I added my knife to the picture, and while I menaced the poor old chap’s throat, Nikka scientifically emptied his pockets and ripped a money-belt from under his clothes.

“Oh, Mister Nikka, sir,” moaned Watkins. “Not that, sir. There wasn’t anything said about me belt, sir. Do be careful with that knife, Mister Jack. It’s me throat, sir, if I may say so. Not the belt, Mister Nikka! Oh,

dear, sir, whatever will I do about me trousers? Torn me apart, you 'ave. Ow!"

This last as Nikka gave every indication of intending to cut his heart out. There came a yell from Hugh around the corner, and Nikka bounded to his feet. Between us we hoisted Watkins to his, and propelled him from us with a couple of really brutal kicks. Collar torn, jacket scruffed and trousers unbraced, Watkins scudded for that corner like a swallow on the wing. But we did not wait to watch his exit. We took to our own heels, and headed in the opposite direction, hesitated at the far corner, and doubled back to the closed door that was buried in the high wall of Tokalji's house.

Nikka banged the thick wood with his knife-hilt.

"Who knocks?" rumbled a voice.

"Two who fear the police."

A small wicket opened.

"We want none such here." And to one within: "Be still."

"There is something to be divided," answered Nikka.

"Where do you come from?"

"Salonika—and elsewhere."

"Tziganes both?" And again to one unseen: "I said be still, little devil."

"My comrade is a Frank—but he is one of us."

A hinge creaked.

"Enter," growled the voice. "Quickly."

The crack was wide enough for one at a time, and we slid through like shadows, the open leaf slamming behind us. We stood in a large courtyard. To right and left were solid, timeworn buildings, two stories high. In front was a broken wall, partially built over by a structure of moldy brick, but there was a gap sufficiently large to reveal the Bosphorus. The court was cluttered with bales of goods and boxes and a number of men and women in Gypsy dress who were occupied in staring at us.

But we did not spare any protracted attention for them. There were two far more interesting characters close at hand. One was a stalwart, black-bearded man, with a seamed, wicked face that wore an habitual scowl. The other was a girl of perhaps eighteen, whose lissome figure set off her ragged dress like a Paquin toilette. She was very brown. Her hair was a tumbled heap of midnight, and her eyes were great glowing depths of passion. Her shapely legs were bare almost to the knee, and her flimsy bodice scarcely covered her. But she carried herself with the unconsciously regal air that I had noticed in Wasso Mikali.

She regarded me almost with contempt, but her eyes fairly devoured Nikka.

"This is the one," she cried, "he ran like that stallion we had from the Arab of Nejd, and you should have seen him strip the old Frank. He would have had the other one too if his friend had been as swift. Heh, foster-father, he has the makings of a great thief!"¹

But the man only glowered at us, his hand on the hilt of one of the long knives in his waist-sash.

"Be still, girl! You jabber like a crow."

"And you snarl like a wolf, Old One," she retorted. "I say I saw them."

"Somewhat of it I saw myself," he admitted, "but is that a reason for taking strangers in from the street? Who knows them?"

"Nobody," answered Nikka promptly. "Only our knives can speak for us."

"Heh, many a man has a knife that talks!" The fellow's grin was fiendish. "A talking knife! It says three words." He flashed his own in the air. "Haugh!" It whistled down in a deadly thrust. "Sss-ssrrr-kk! And it goes home. Drip-drip! And the tale is told. That is all a knife can say."

And he sheathed his own, still grinning.

¹ Nikka afterwards translated these conversations for me.

"That is why a sure knife is valuable," returned Nikka. "A pistol, now. That shouts aloud. But a knife only whispers, and if a knife knows but three words, how many of its masters can have that said of them?"

"You talk more than most, it seems," leered the bearded man. He was quick of wit.

"I have said what I have said," stated Nikka, folding his arms. "My comrade and I are new to Stamboul. We have heard of Beran Tokalji in many camps. In the winter we were in Paris, the great city of the Franks, and there, too, men spoke of Tokalji. A great thief, they said, and one who treated his people well."

"How do you know that I am Tokalji?" demanded the bearded man, plainly flattered by Nikka's speech.

Of course, Nikka did not know him, but he was quick to seize the opportunity and make the most of it.

"I have often heard you described around the fires. It was enough to see the way you handle a knife. 'As sure as the knife of Tokalji' is the saying all along the road from Salonika to Buda and beyond into the Frank countries."

"If you knew me and sought my help, was it wise to rob in front of my door?" countered Tokalji, but the scowl on his face was supplanted by a smirk.

Nikka affected embarrassment.

"Why, as to that, voivode, there is something to be said," he agreed. "But we saw the Franks, and their looks spelt gold, and—what would you? 'Twas a chance. Also, we thought the police would not dare to touch us here."

"That may be true," Tokalji agreed in his turn. "But there are Frank soldiers in Pera, and how if they came here to seize you?"

"But the Franks did not see us enter," said Nikka.

The girl thrust herself scornfully to the fore.

"Gabble, gabble, gabble," she mocked. "Are we old wives that we mouth over everything? These men robbed, they fled unseen, they have their loot. Foster-father, you

are not so keen as you once were. Something was said of a division."

A greedy light dawned in Tokalji's eyes.

"Yes, yes," he insisted, "that is right. So you said, my lad, and if you would have shelter you must pay for it."

"So will I."

Nikka flung the money-belt, some loose change and a watch down on the ground, and squatted beside them. The rest of us did the same. The girl seized the belt, and emptied the compartments, one by one.

"English gold," she exclaimed. "This was worth taking. You are a man of judgment, friend—What is your name?"

"I am called Giorgi Bordu. My friend is named Jakka in the Tzigane camps. The name he bore in his own country is buried under a killing."

She looked at me more respectfully.

"Oh-ho, so he has killed, has he?"

"Yes, maiden. He is not a Gypsy, so with the knife—" Nikka shrugged his shoulders in deprecation—"but with his hands, and the pistol, now! You should see him when there is quick work to be done."

She began shifting the money into three equal piles.

"Did he have any papers, that Frank?" asked Tokalji abruptly.

"All that he had is there," replied Nikka.

"Humph!" The Gypsy thought for a moment. "It was strange that you attacked those two, Giorgi Bordu. I do not want them sneaking around here. They are after something that I want myself."

Nikka, sitting back on his heels, produced his tobacco-box and rolled a cigarette.

"Perhaps a strange thief and his friend might be of aid to you," he suggested.

"Perhaps they might. I don't know—You are smart fellows, I can see that. And I need men like you. But

I am not alone in this. There are others, do you see? I must consult them. Still, you should be better than the two I am using just now."

"Are they Tziganes?" inquired Nikka politely.

"Of a sort. But they have lived too long with the Franks. They are not so ready as they once were, and I find they do not bring me the information I require. I make no promises, but suppose I—"

The girl screamed, and I twisted on my haunches to see that Nikka had seized her wrist.

"Let me go, pig," she hissed, and reached for her knife with her free hand; but Nikka caught that, too.

Tokalji stared at them both unpleasantly.

"What is this?" he barked. "Do you assail my people already before you are accepted a member of my tribe?"

"I am protecting your purse and mine from this little thief," answered Nikka calmly. "While we talked, she stole."

"He lies," spat the girl. "There is the money."

She stretched a slim brown foot toward the three little piles on the sunken flagstones. Tokalji drew his knife.

"If you take liberties with me I will carve out your bowels," he warned savagely.

Nikka's reply was to rake open the girl's bodice with his hooked fingers. A stream of coins tinkled on the pavement. He released her, and she leaped back out of his reach, staring down at him with a puzzled look in her eyes, entirely regardless of her nakedness.

Tokalji burst out laughing, and resheathed his knife.

"She is a rare one. You are the first to catch her so."

"And he will be the last!" she said in a low, tense voice.

A wave of color suffused her from breast to forehead. But it was from rage, not modesty. She ripped a dagger from her waist.

"Now, we shall see if you can fight or only boast," she rasped, crouching forward.

Nikka shook his head.

"I don't fight with women," he said.

"You'd better fight with her," said Tokalji philosophically, "or she will kill you. She has a swifter blade than any man of my tribe."

Nikka sank back on his haunches.

"I will not draw my knife," he said.

"Then you will die," she hissed, and charged.

I rose, and made to intervene, but Tokalji drew his knife again and came between us.

"Let her have her chance, man," he ordered in his snarling voice, and before I could pass him she struck.

But her knife was stayed in mid air. Nikka's arm darted out, his fingers clutched her wrist, there was a wrench—and the knife clattered beside the stolen coins. He forced her down by his side, picked up the knife and handed it to her. Then turned his back, and resumed his conversation with Tokalji.

"You were speaking of information you required," he said.

Tokalji eyed him in amazement.

"Do you wear the death-shirt that you care so little for death?" he asked.

"Death comes when it is ready," returned Nikka impassively. "Is a man to fear a maiden?"

"Many men fear that maiden," retorted Tokalji grimly. "Heh, you are a fighter. We will accept your comrade for whatever he is. You I know I can use. Kara!"

The girl looked at him sullenly.

"Take the strangers to Mother Kathene. Tell her to bed them with the young men."

She stood up, her half-clad Dryad's body shining a golden bronze hue.

"I am not afraid of you, Giorgi Bordu," she said, humbly fearless. "You turned aside my knife with your bare hand, and my life is yours. Will you take it?"

As she spoke, she pulled aside what scanty rags remained of her bodice, and exposed her breast for his

knife. Nikka regarded her curiously, and a light I had never seen there before gleamed momentarily in his eyes.

"Your life is your own, maiden," he answered. "But remember I steal from others. Others do not steal from me."

"That is as it should be," she said. "You are a voivode, a chief. I knew you were no ordinary man when I saw you hunt down the old Frank in the street. I said to myself: 'That man is a great thief. He must be the king of a tribe.' To-night," she added royally, "I will pay ransom for my life. I will dance for you."

Tokalji emitted a peculiar gurgling sound which was intended for laughter.

"Heh, Giorgi Bordu, have you by chance been a bear-tamer?" he asked as he swept up his pile of gold and turned away.

CHAPTER XVI

THE RED STONE

NIKKA and I pouched our shares of the loot we had brought in, Nikka appropriating to himself Watkins's Birmingham silver watch. The Gypsy girl never took her eyes off him as she absently re-fastened her tattered bodice.

"We are ready," said Nikka.

Her face flowered in an instantaneous smile.

"It is well, Giorgi Bordu. Come with me."

She led us across the courtyard to the building which fronted it on the left and was extended by the brick addition I have spoken of to shut in partially the rear of the court which abutted on the Bosphorus. A man was leaning over in the doorway, strapping up a bundle, and Kara planted her bare foot in the middle of his back, sending him sprawling. He was up in a flash, with his knife out and his face distorted with anger; but when he saw who had kicked him, the anger turned to smiles. He swung the bundle on his shoulder and swaggered off. And Kara looked at Nikka, with the expectant manner of a child who has performed a trick and expects to be applauded for it.

I grinned. I couldn't help it. But Nikka only motioned impatiently to the doorway. She caught her lip in a pout, dug her toes in the dust and affected not to understand him; but Nikka took one stride, with arm extended, and she danced away, all smiles again. Apparently, she didn't mind as long as she made him look at her.

Inside the door was a big, stone-paved hall. There

were traces of carvings on the capitals of the pillars and a spaciousness that spoke of ancient glories. The stairs that led to the upper story were railed with marble and grooved deep by the tread of countless feet. But the place reeked with the squalor of a tenement. Three old women were huddled in front of a fire that blazed on an enormous hearth, and strings of onions and garlic hung from hooks in the ceiling. All around were scattered dirty piles of blankets and personal belongings.

Kara skipped across to the fireplace, and tapped the oldest of the three women on the shoulder.

"Hi, Mother Kathene," she called loudly. "Here are two strangers Beran has taken into the tribe."

The three hags tottered to their feet, and peered at us with bleared eyes.

"Strangers?" whined Mother Kathene. "Why strangers in the tribe? Haven't we enough fine young men to stab and steal for the chief? Heh-heh! I don't like strangers."

"Strangers are bad luck," pronounced a second bel-dame, whose name was Zitzi.

"Bad luck," echoed the third, who was called Lilli. "And I suppose we'll have to cook and scrub for the rascals, too."

Kara pinched her with a viciousness that made the poor old thing squeal.

"Don't talk of scrubbing to me!" she sneered. "You wouldn't touch water to a foul pot, let alone a man's clothes. You'd drown if you were rained on. Bah, Mother Lilli, you are lucky to have a chief like Beran, who gives the old ones work to do and shelter and food for the end of their days, instead of driving them out to seek the bounty of the Roumis and Franks. And you are luckier still to have a great thief like Giorgi Bordu to cook for. He is the greatest thief in the world. Why, he even caught me when I would have stolen from him!"

"If he steals well, he won't be a fighter," mumbled Mother Kathene. "What about the other one?"

"He took my knife from me without drawing his own," flared Kara. "No other man in the tribe could do that. The other? Oh, he is a Frank."

"More bad luck," wailed old Zitzi. "Tzigane folk who live with Franks are always spoiled. They worship the Christian goddess or they grow clumsy or they lose their courage or they take the spotted sickness."

Kara clouted her on the head.

"I have done with it," she commanded imperiously. "Where are Giorgi and Jakka to lie?"

"Where they choose," returned Zitzi sourly.

Kara waved her hand about the chamber.

"Here or above, whichever you say," she announced to us. "These are the quarters of the young men."

"May we look above?" asked Nikka, anxious to seize this opportunity to explore.

Her answer was to dance up the stairs—she seldom walked or did anything slowly.

We followed her. There was a central corridor, and from it opened various rooms, some of them crammed with all manner of goods, valuable rugs, bric-a-brac, cloths, and frequently, the veriest junk.

"Beran stores plunder here, as you can see," she said. "The other rooms are empty. The young men prefer to sleep all together where they can watch one another."

Nikka realized that if we set up a different standard of conduct from that observed by our brother bachelors we would prejudice our position in this strange community.

"What is good enough for them is good enough for us," he decided. "But is there no more to see? I thought the building ran around by the water."

"There is no connection," she replied. "The building over the water is just a storehouse. We are a great tribe, and Beran has agents everywhere. Never a day goes by

that plunder does not come in, and we store it until there is opportunity to dispose of it."

"He is a master thief," agreed Nikka. "So we had heard. But where do you live, maiden?"

Her face glowed rosily with satisfaction at this first evidence of his interest in herself.

"Across the court," she answered. "Come and you shall see."

We descended the stairs into the big hall on the ground-floor, where the three hags had crouched again before the fire, and crossed the courtyard to the building opposite on the right of the entrance. It was long and graceful in appearance, beautifully built of a hard white marble, which had been coated with dirt for centuries. The cornices were elaborately sculptured in a conventional design; the window openings were carved and set with a light mastery that disguised their bulk.

The door was supported by simple pillars of wonderful green stone that contrived to show its color through the accumulation of filth which tried to mask it. How such pillars could have escaped the antiquary I do not know. They were as handsome as anything in St. Sophia. But then, as we were to discover, the whole abode of Beran Tokalji constituted an amazing shrine of Byzantine art, perhaps the most remarkable non-ecclesiastical remnant in the city.

But of all this I thought little at the time. What interested me more than anything was that immediately above the door on a panel let into the wall was carved a representation of a bull, head lowered and in act to charge. I looked at Nikka, and his eyes met mine with a warning glance to say nothing. It was a good thing that my knowledge of Gypsy dialect was sketchy, for had I been able to, I believe I should have exclaimed over this first clue and attempted to probe our guide's knowledge of it.

Kara never gave the sculpture a glance; it meant nothing to her. She beckoned us inside the door. Here again

was a spacious, pillared hall, triple-aisled like a small church, its battered pavement showing traces here and there of the gorgeous mosaics which once had floored it. Whatever decorations adorned its walls were obscured by the incrustations of centuries of misuse. The pillars were of different stones, many of them semi-precious, and occasionally glinting pink or red or green or yellow through their drab coats of dirt and soot. At one end was an apse-like space large enough to hold a dinner table or a throne, and on the curving wall I fancied I could discern faint traces of one of those mosaic portraits with which the Byzantine artists loved to adorn their buildings.

But this superb chamber was littered with the odds and ends of a people accustomed to dwell in tents. I suppose Tokalji's tribe, by all accounts we had, had been living here for some hundreds of years, yet they never adapted themselves to urban conditions. Generation after generation looked upon this wonderful fragment of one of the world's stateliest palaces as no more than the four walls and a roof required to keep out rain and cold. The windows were covered by wooden shutters. Cleaning was resorted to only when the atmosphere became unsupportable for the salted nostrils of the tribe.

"These are the quarters of the married people," explained Kara. "Beran sleeps here." She pointed to a pallet in the recess that I likened to an apse. "The others upstairs."

"And you?" asked Nikka.

"Oh, I live where I choose, but most of all I like my garden."

"Your garden? Where is there a garden?"

"I will show you, Giorgi Bordu."

At the end of the hall opposite the apse there was a worn stone stair. The shallow steps descended straight to an opening, barred by a rude pine door. As we passed it, I noted idly holes in the stone lintels where formerly had been cemented the bolts of heavy metal hinges. A gate,

perhaps. Beyond the door was a pleasant room in which several women sewed, and children scrabbled in the dirt on the floor. The sunlight poured in from windows facing us. I saw trees tossing, heard the splash of water.

Kara crossed the room, with a nod to the women, and opened another door. This led to a pillared portico, and I gasped in wonder at the sheer loveliness of this morsel of imperial Byzantium, buried in the frowsy lanes of Stamboul. There was a tangled stretch of garden, weed-grown, of course, and two jade-green cedars that lifted their heads in isolated majesty. Around the four sides ran the portico, although in two places the pillars had collapsed and the wreckage of the roof strewn the ground. But the gem of the place was the fountain in the center, a lion rearing back on his hind-legs with a broken spear in his chest. From his open mouth poured a stream of water that fell into a stone-rimmed pool.

"That is where I swim," volunteered Kara. "It is not far, but I can beat you across it. Would you like me to try?"

And with that pagan innocence which characterized her, she started to drop skirt and bodice.

"Another time," said Nikka, laughing, and with a single look to see if he was in earnest in refusing such sport, she promptly refastened her clothes. "This is lower than the rest of the house, isn't it?"

She assented, and it was then that I recovered from the bewilderment inspired by the unexpected charm of the picture, and realized for the first time what it meant. The bull above the entrance door, the hall, the stair, the marks of heavy hinges at its foot where a gate had hung, the room where the women sat, an atrium, in the old Roman architecture; the garden—by Jove, even the cedars!—the Garden of the Cedars; and the Fountain of the Lion! It was exactly as the first Hugh had described it in the missing half of the Instructions which we had found.

I dug my fingers into Nikka's arm.

"Yes, yes," he said quietly in English. "I see it, too. But do not let yourself seem excited."

Involuntarily I repeated to myself the concluding sentences of the Instructions which we had all memorized:

"From the center of the Fountain take four paces west toward the wall of the atrium. Then walk three paces north. Underfoot is a red stone an ell square."

The center of the Fountain—where could that be? The pool stretched sidewise to us, as we stood in front of the atrium. Plainly, then, it was intended to mean from the center of the pedestal on which the lion was perched. I stepped out from the portico, measured with my eye the distance from the pedestal west toward the wall of the atrium, and walked north on the paved walk which rimmed the central grass-plot.

The flagging here, while naturally worn by the passage of time, was as even as though it had been laid yesterday. It was composed of blocks of red and brown granite in a checker-board pattern, but they seemed to be only a foot square. It was not until I passed the center of the fountain that I discovered that at regular intervals a larger stone was inserted in the design. And sure enough, I found a red one about three and a half paces, as I roughly made it, in a northerly line from the point I had calculated as four paces west of the center of the fountain.

Kara had no eyes for any one save Nikka, and I ventured to stamp my sandaled heel on the stone as I trod over it. It gave back no different sound from those on either side of it, but when my first disappointment had passed, I told myself that this was no more than could have been expected. Had it sounded hollow, surely, some person in the course of seven centuries would have noticed it, and whether possessed of knowledge of the treasure or not, must have had sufficient enterprise to attempt to find what it concealed.

I walked on around the garden, determined to take advantage of this extraordinary opportunity to survey the

ground. But there was nothing else to see. On one side the porticos fringed a blank wall, evidently belonging to the adjoining property. Vernon King afterwards said that at some period this group of buildings of the Palace of the Bucoleon had been cut up into separate structures and built together in blocks. On the side toward the Bosphorus a wing of the building we had traversed intervened. Through the frequent windows I saw Gypsy men and women and a few children lounging or occupied with their household duties or playing. One of the men was teaching a boy to pick pockets. I watched him for some time with interest.

I finally abandoned my investigations because I gathered from the tones of their voices that Nikka was having an argument with Kara. When I came up to them, Nikka was offering her Watkins's watch; but she dashed it to the pavement, burst into tears and fled back the way we had come.

"What have you been doing, Lothario?" I demanded in French.

Nikka looked very unhappy.

"She wanted me to kiss her. I—I offered her that watch, in the first place. To make up for showing her up the way I did; that was to impress Tokalji, of course. And then I thought she had been pretty decent to us since."

"I daresay she has been," I agreed. "For a purpose, to be sure."

"A purpose?"

"Well, she asked you for something, didn't she?" I gibed.

"Oh, that!" Nikka's discomfort was heart-warming. "She doesn't know any better, Jack. I've seen her kind before—at least, none as bright as she or quite as pretty; but the same kind of untamed wild-cats. We Gypsies spoil our women if they have any spirit. And she—Well, you could see for yourself. She has been brought up in this atmosphere. Crime is an art with her. She looks upon

a clever robbery as you do on a good job of architecture. She has lived with men ever since she left her mother's arms. She doesn't know what it means to be refused anything. She—she's all right, you know."

"I know she's the prettiest savage creature I've ever seen," I returned drily. "Since she is the first, however, that may not mean much. You seem to be very anxious to explain her savagery, my friend. Why didn't you kiss her?"

Nikka picked up the watch and examined the broken crystal.

"I don't think we'd better stay here," he answered vaguely. "Women's quarters, and all that sort of thing. Hullo, here's Tokalji, now!"

The Gypsy chief stalked out of the atrium.

"What have you been doing to the girl?" he growled.

"I wouldn't kiss her," said Nikka with a sudden grin.

Tokalji's bearded face was cracked by a burst of gargoyle laughter.

"You are a wise one! I said so! I know men, I, Beran Tokalji! But hark you," and his tone took on an edge, "be careful with her. She is all I have, and I give her to no man I do not know. You come in out of the street, whoever you are. Prove yourself, and I can make much of you. But until you prove yourself, you and this Frank jackal with you, you walk carefully and jump when you hear the lash."

"Is she your daughter?" asked Nikka.

"Never mind who she is. What are you doing here?"

"She was showing us the fountain."

"That is all right. But the young men stay out of this house. I want no troubles over women in the tribe. Remember that, you two."

CHAPTER XVII

THE DANCE IN THE COURTYARD

TOKALJI herded us through the atrium and up the stairs into the large chamber with the apse where he, himself, slept.

"Sit," he ordered roughly, motioning to several stools. "I have something to say."

He went to a chest in the corner, and drew from it a bottle of rakia, raw Oriental brandy. I looked about for a cup as he handed it to Nikka, but my comrade, better versed in the customs of the country, deftly wiped the bottle's neck with his coat-sleeve, hoisted it for a long dram, wiped the neck again and passed it to me. I imitated him as well as I could, although a passing acquaintance with Cognac in my days as a student at the Beaux Arts and also in the A. E. F. did not save me from a choking sensation as the fiery liquid burned my gullet. Tokalji regarded me with contempt when I handed it to him, tilted the bottle bottom-up and drained the equivalent of a water-glass, with a smack of gusto.

"There," he said, setting the bottle on the floor. "We'll talk better wet than dry—although I will say, Giorgi, your friend is no great hand at the bottle. I hope he's a better thief."

"Only try him," said Nikka eagerly.

"Humph, I may! But to be frank with you, my lad, I don't want you two for a thieving job. It's something more difficult, and the reward will be in proportion."

Nikka permitted his fingers to caress the hilt of his knife.

"We should enjoy a good killing," he hinted.

"No, no, Giorgi. That will come in time, but whatever

else you do, you must keep your knife sheathed in this business. As it happens, the men we are after are worth more to us alive than dead."

"Whatever you say, voivode," answered Nikka equably. "But what about your own men? They're a likely-looking lot."

"Yes, but not so many of them have the gifts I require in this service," retorted Tokalji, lifting the bottle once more. "They are clever thieves and fighters, but what I require now is men who can follow and spy. My best men at that work have failed to produce anything worth while in two weeks, and moreover, they have become known to our enemies. I must have new men, and abler men."

He bent his brows in a ferocious grimace.

"If you succeed, you are my friends. You shall have rich pickings. But if you fail you had better leave Stamboul."

Nikka dropped his hand again on his knife.

"Why threaten?" he asked coolly.

Tokalji glared at him with the blankly savage menace of an old gorilla.

"Beware how you defy Beran Tokalji in his own den," he snarled. "Well, let it pass. It shows you have spirit, but do not tempt me too far, Giorgi. When I am aroused I must taste blood."

Nikka rose.

"I am a free man," he answered casually. "So is my comrade, Jakka. We sell our knives and our fingers to the best bidder, and if we don't like the treatment we say so and leave."

Tokalji regarded him uneasily.

"Here," he said gruffly, offering the bottle, "drink again and think better of it, man. No harm is done by plain talk. That's right. Sit. I get along with those who don't fear me too much. You shall not be sorry you strayed in here—but you must deal honestly with me.

I am buying your wits, and I expect something for my money."

"So far it is only we who have paid," retorted Nikka. "How much are we to get?"

"How much? It depends upon how much we win. There will be hundreds of gold pieces for every man if it goes right."

"If what goes right?"

Tokalji hitched his stool closer to us, and glanced around.

"See you, Giorgi—and you, too, Jakka, if you can understand any of this talk,—the two Franks you robbed live at the hotel in Pera, where all the rich Franks stay."

"We saw it this morning," assented Nikka.

"These two Franks are an English lord and his servant. They seek something which I also seek and with them in their venture are two others, an Amerikansky, Nash, and one named Zaranko, who, they say, is a fiddler and was one of our people in his youth."

"I have heard of that one," said Nikka.

"Would you know his face?"

"I think I would."

"Good! Above everything else we wish to learn what has become of the Americansky and the fiddler and when they are to arrive. Also, they are two more Franks at the hotel, a man named King and his daughter. They, I think, are Amerikansky like Nash. We do not understand how they come to be in this business. If they are really in it, perhaps it would be worth while to kidnap the girl. We might hold her to blackmail her friends."

"But what do they seek that you also seek?" asked Nikka.

"If you breathe it to a soul, I will cut out your heart with my own knife, I, Beran Tokalji," replied the Gypsy chief by way of preface. "They have the secret to a treasure."

"What?" exclaimed Nikka with great pretense of astonishment. "Here in Stamboul?"

"Close by, my lad, close by. They know its location, but if we are smart we should be able to take it from them as soon as they reveal their knowledge. It is for us to find out their secret or wring it from them, by torture, if necessary."

"This is a job worth doing," cried Nikka, jumping up. "Jakka and I will be diligent. We will start now to trail the Franks."

But Tokalji barred the door to him.

"Not so fast, not so fast," he answered with his gargoyle laughter. "The job has waited for you some time. It can wait a few hours longer. I prefer to keep you under my wing for the night, until we become better acquainted. You look like the right sort of fellow, Giorgi, and your friend is not so poor a man for a Frank; but after all, as I said to you, you came in to me from the street this afternoon, and all I know about you is that you are a good thief.

"It is not enough. I must know more. And for another thing, it will help you to await the return of the two I have out watching these Franks in Pera. They have not found much, but they can tell you something of what the Franks do and how they spend their time. So make yourselves comfortable. You shall eat heartily, and this evening Kara will dance in the courtyard as she promised you. That is worth waiting for, Giorgi. If I were a young fellow, I would rather do that than lurk the corners of Pera. Heh-heh!"

He stepped aside, and waved us permission to go; and we walked through the courtyard to the crumbling wall which rimmed the Bosphorus at one point, its base a rubble-heap, its battlements in fragments, its platform overgrown with weeds. From its top we could look down on the margin of beach, loaded with boulders, and the ruins of what had been a jetty enclosing a little harbor for the Imperial pleasure galleys.

"It would not be difficult to climb up here," I said

idly, pointing to the gaps between the stones, and the sloping piles of bowlders. "Does he suspect us, Nikka?"

"No, that is only his Gypsy caution. He thinks we are too good to be true. He needed what we seem to be—and behold, we arrive! He has waited long. He feels he can wait a little longer."

"I'm afraid he may wait a little too long for us," I answered.

"There's a chance," Nikka admitted after a moment's reflection. "But we've got to risk it. In the meantime you must let me do all the talking. I'll tell everybody you are a sulky devil, a killer whose deeds haunt him. They'll leave you alone. Gypsies respect temperamental criminals. But come along, we mustn't stay by ourselves. We'll be suspectel of considering ourselves too highly or else having something to conceal. We can't afford any suspicions or even a dislike."

So we strolled over to the young men's quarters, and while I wrapped myself in a gloomy atmosphere that I considered was typical of a temperamental killer, Nikka swapped anecdotes of crime with the others who drifted in and out. I looked for Kara, but she was nowhere in view. After Nikka had once established my character, the Gypsies gave me a wide berth, and I had nothing to do but smoke and appear murderous. And I must say I got sick of the part. I was the first man up when Mother Kathene swung the stew-pot out of the chimney and old Zitzi and Lilli began to distribute tin plates and cups in an irregular circle on the floor. It was poor food, but plenty, and anyway, it broke the monotony of being an abandoned criminal.

With the passing of the twilight the young men moved to the courtyard. In the middle of the open space was a black smirch on the paving, and here they built a fire of driftwood collected from the beach under the wall. It was a tribute to the immemorial habits of their race. Even here in the crowded city they must close the day with a

discussion of its events around a tribal blaze, exactly as they would have done upon the road, exactly as thousands of other Gypsy tribes were doing at that very moment on the slopes of the Caucasus, in the recesses of the Rilo Dag, in the pine forests of the Carpathians, on the alien flanks of the Appalachians far across the sea.

A buzz of talk arose. The primitive Gypsy fiddles and guitars began to twang softly. Nikka was the center of a gossiping group. Men and women from the opposite side of the court joined the circle. Young girls, with the lithe grace of the Gypsy, as unselfconscious as animals, sifted through the ranks of the bachelors. Beran Tokalji, himself, a cigarette drooping sardonically from the corner of his mouth, stalked out and sat down with Nikka.

In the changing shadows beyond the range of the fire-light children dodged and played unhindered by their elders. High overhead the stars shone like fireflies under a purple vault. And from the spreading mass of Stamboul echoed a gentle hum, the hum of a giant hive, a myriad voices talking, singing, praying, laughing, shouting, cursing, screaming. None of the discordant night noises of the West. No whistle-blasts, no shrieking of flat wheels on tortured rails, no honking of motor-horns, no clamor of machinery. Only the drone of the hive.

A man raised his voice in a song, and the exultantly melancholy pæan to beauty blended with the other sounds like a skillfully woven thread in a tapestry. It died away so gradually as to seem as if it had never been. The fiddles sighed to silence in a burst of expiring passion.

Nobody spoke for several moments. Music was bred in the bone of these wild folk. It held them as could nothing else.

"What of Giorgi Bordu?" said Tokalji presently. "Does he sing or play or dance?"

Nikka reached out his hand almost eagerly.

“I will play, if you wish. I vowed not to touch the fiddle again, but—”

His fingers closed lovingly on the crude instrument, and he cuddled it under his chin. His bow swept the strings in a torrent of arpeggios. He stood up and strode into the firelight as if upon a stage. And then he began to play, plaintively, at first, in a minor key. There were the noises of the night, a crackling fire, animals stirring, the cry of a child, awakening. The music brightened, quickened, became joyous. You felt the rays of the sun, and comfort of work. Men and women danced and sang. A harsh note intervened. There was a quarrel. Anger yelled from the strings. Turmoil ensued. Faster and faster went the tune. And then peace, and the measure became slower, almost stately.

The caravan had passed on. A forest encompassed it. Boughs clashed overhead, birds twittered and sang. Cool shadows fell athwart the path. But the way grew steep. The music told of the rocks and the slippery mud where a stream had overflowed, of the steady climb, of the endurance required. The caravan reached the height. A chill wind blew, but fair before them stretched a pleasant land, and the descent was easy to the warm, brown road that wound across the plain. Sunset and camp again, firelight, the moon overhead, talk of love, the sensuous movement of a dance. Then, languorous and slow, the coming of sleep.

I did not know it, but I was listening to the composition of Zaranko's Gypsy Sonata Op. 27, which some day, I suppose, will be as famous as the Revolutionary Etude or the Hungarian Rhapsody or Beethoven's dream of the moonlight. But no audience will ever hear it with greater appreciation than those ragged Gypsies who sat around the fire in the dirty courtyard of the house in Sokaki Masyeri. As Nikka resumed his place in the outer circle, only the whispering of the flames broke the stillness. The very

children were frozen on their knees, drunk with the ecstasy of melody.

"Heh!" called Beran Tokalji, first to shake off the spell. "I do not wonder you vowed not to touch the fiddle, if you like the open road. With that bow of your's, Giorgi Bordu, you could wring hundreds of gold pieces from the Franks. You play like the Redcoats in the khans in Buda and Buharest. Heh-heh! I have heard Niketu and Stoyan Mirko and Karaji, and they were not to be compared with you. It is seldom the bravest men have the touch of the fiddler."

Others spoke up readily in praise or asked questions as to Nikka's opinion on moot points of harmony and the desirable methods of interpreting various Gipsy songs. They would have had him play again, but he refused. I think he was emotionally exhausted.

"We have no fiddler to match with you," remarked Tokalji, "and the gaida¹ and the flute are not fit for real music. But our maidens can dance. Heh, girls, come out, shy ones! Let the strangers view your grace."

They giggled amongst themselves, and swayed into a group that was as spontaneously instinct with rhythm as an old Greek temple frieze. But suddenly they split apart.

"Kara will dance," they cried. "Let Kara dance for the strangers."

And Kara floated into the circle of firelight like a spirit of the forest. She still wore only the scanty madder-red skirt and torn bodice. The cloud of her hair tumbled below her waist. Her tiny naked feet barely touched the ground. Slowly she whirled, and the Gipsy fiddles caught her time. A man with cymbals clashed an accompaniment. A flute whistled soprano. She increased the tempo; she varied her steps. She was a flower shrinking beneath the grass. She was a dove pursued by a falcon. She was a maiden deserted by her lover. She was a fairy hovering above the world.

¹ Bagpipes.

We who watched her were breathless with the joy of the spectacle, and when she sank to the ground in a little pile of rags and hair as the music ended, I thought she must be worn out. But she bounded up at once, breathing regularly, radiating vitality.

"Now I will dance the Knife Dance!" she exclaimed. "Who will dance with me?" And before any could answer her, she seized a blazing stick from the fire, and ran around the circle waving it overhead until she came to where Nikka sat. "Ho, Giorgi Bordu, you who do not fear the knife, will you dance the Knife Dance with me?"

Every eye in the circle was fixed on Nikka, for, although I did not know it then, to have refused her invitation would have been a deadly insult, equivalent to a declaration of enmity toward her family and tribe. Similarly, acceptance of it amounted to an admission that he considered her favorably as a wife, without definitely committing him to matrimony.

Nikka did not hesitate. He stepped to her side. She slipped one arm around his waist, and with the other swung her torch in air until it showered sparks over the circle.

"Hi!" she cried.

"Hi!" echoed Nikka.

And they pranced around the fire while the music commenced an air so fiercely wild that it made the blood tingle to listen to it. Then she flung down her torch, and tore free from Nikka's arm. He followed her. She eluded him. Round and round they tore, keeping step the while. Now she accepted him, now she rejected him. At last he turned from her, arms folded, contemptuously unmoved. She wooed him with rhythmic ardor. He denied her. She drew her knife; he drew his. Eyes glaring, lips pinched, they circled one another, feinting, striking, leaping, posturing.

"Click!" The blades struck together.

"Hi! Hi!" they cried.

"Click! Clack! Click!" went the knife-blades.

"Ho! Ho!" they shouted.

The game was to see how near you could come without cutting. To avoid hurt the dancers required quick eyes and agile bodies. The blades flashed like meteors in the shifting light, wheeling and slashing and stabbing. In the beginning Kara forced the pace. Nikka retired before her, rather than risk doing her harm. But slowly he assumed the mastery. His knife was always at her throat, and active as she was, he refused to be shaken off. She fended desperately, panting now, bright-eyed and flushed. But he pressed her. Their blades clashed, he gave his a twist and hers dropped from her hand.

He seized her, forcing her back across his knee, knife up-raised to strike, while the fiddles clutched at one's nerves and the cymbals clanged with wicked glee. The scene—Nikka's tall figure, with the poised knife, and the lithe, slender form he held, expressing in every curve and line its tempestuous, untamed soul—brought to my memory the song I had heard him sing one morning in the music-room at Chesby:

And best of all, I shall hear
The wild, mad Tzigane songs,
Cruel and gay and lustful,
Like fiddles and clanging gongs.

And in the glare of the campfires
I shall see the Tziganes dance—
Women with lithe, round bodies,
Men straight as a heiduck's lance.

And perhaps a wild brown maiden
Will seek me—

Crash! boomed a knock on the street-door. And rap-rap-rap! it was repeated. Crash! again.

The music stopped. Nikka released his partner, and

Kara stooped quickly and snatched up her knife, tossing the hair out of her eyes, heedless as usual of the rags that slipped off her shoulders.

Men looked at each other uncertainly. Hands crept to waist-sashes.

“Heh!” said Tokalji. “Who can it be in such a hurry at this hour?”

Crash! The door resounded under the battering of a pistol-butt.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BIG SHOW BEGINS

THE women and children—all save Kara—withdrew into the shadows. The men gathered together. Tokalji crossed to the entrance.

“Less noise there!” he shouted threateningly. “This is a peaceful house.”

But his manner changed the moment he opened the wicket. What he said we could not hear, but we saw him quickly turn the lock and throw back a leaf of the door, salaaming low as he stepped aside. Six men burst in, four of them in European clothes, and Nikka and I exchanged a glance of apprehension as we recognized the broad shoulders of their leader and heard his snarling voice.

Toutou LaFitte had arrived. With him were Hilyer, Serge Vassilievich and Hilmi Bey. The two who brought up the rear, somewhat sulky and fearful, were the spies we had seen in front of the Pera Palace that morning.

“Can I trust nobody to fulfill my orders?” whined Toutou, striding toward the fire. “I tell you to spare no efforts—and I come to find you singing and dancing around a fire! Is that working? Is that carrying out our treaty? But all are the same! My best people fail me.”

His green eyes shone evilly; his hands writhed with suppressed ferocity. Tokalji, having refastened the door, followed him across the courtyard. The Gypsy looked uncomfortable, but showed no fear.

“What could we have done that we have not done?” he retorted. “Was it our fault that you lost track of the two missing ones? As for the English lord and his servant, my two men that I see with you have shadowed them day and night.”

"And lost them to-day, as they admit," snarled Toutou. "Lost them for a whole day! Who knows what has been accomplished in that time?"

"You are right there," agreed Tokalji coolly, "and I have just picked two new men to take their places. Zlacho and Petko are good enough for ordinary thievery, but this job seems to be above them."

"That is well," said Toutou, partly mollified. "There must be a change in our methods or we shall fail in this coup. I decided to hasten on to Constantinople with my colleagues because I was sure the two who have escaped us must come here sooner or later, and whenever they come we shall find them. But I cannot do everything. It is for you to follow their trails."

"Never fear! We shall," replied Tokalji. "My new men start out at once. One of them is a Frank like yourself; the other is a Tzigane."

"Ha, let me see that Frank," exclaimed Toutou. "I know many of the Franks who live with the Tziganes."

"Step out, Giorgi Bordu and Jakka," called Tokalji.

Nikka sunk his fingers in my arm in a warning grip, and we stepped forth from the group of Tziganes clustered in front of the fire. There was at least a chance that we should not be identified—but its value was demonstrated the instant the firelight splashed over Nikka's aquiline face and tense, febrile body.

"Surely, I have seen that lean fellow before," piped Hilmi Bey, pointing at Nikka.

"I saw them standing near the Frank lord and his servant in Pera this morning," said one of the spies.

"What of that?" shouted Tokalji angrily. "It is true they followed the Franks—which was more than you could do, Petko—and robbed them."

"No, the Franks followed them," protested Zlacho, the other spy.

"You lie, you dog!" bellowed Tokalji. "You think to

discredit them because they will do the work you bungled.”

Vassilievich pushed in front of the newcomers.

“Is it my imagination,” he inquired softly, “or does the stocky one bear a resemblance to the Americansky, Nash?”

“By jove, I think you’re right!” exclaimed Hilyer, speaking for the first time.

“Be ready,” hissed Nikka from the corner of his mouth, without shifting his eyes from our enemies.

His right hand was thrust into his waist-sash.

“I do not like this business,” rasped Toutou, pulling a knife from inside his vest. “Somebody shall be tortured until he tells the truth.”

I felt a pressure between Nikka and myself, and Kara’s voice whispered:

“Run, you fools! To the House of the Married!”

Nikka’s pistol flashed blue in the firelight.

“Shoot, Jack!” he cried.

A ruddy flame jetted from his muzzle, and the spy Petko dropped dead. Toutou LaFitte pushed Zlacho in the line of fire before himself, and dived into the encircling shadows as Zlacho crumpled up with a broken leg. Tokalji, Hilyer, Vassilievich and Hilmi scattered. I swung on my heel and shot twice over the group of Gypsies by the fire. I could not bring myself to shoot at them, for there were women and children close by. Then a bullet whistled past my ear, and Toutou’s voice whined:

“No shooting! Use your knives! Take them alive!”

I had a fleeting glimpse of Kara, running at me with her knife raised.

“There are only two!” roared Tokalji. “Pull them down!”

“Run!” I heard Nikka shout.

We pelted for the house on our left, the House of the Married, as Kara had called it. Despite Toutou’s warning, a second bullet spattered on the stones between Nikka and me; but we were poor marks in the half-light, with people

running in every direction, many of them uncertain who were friends or foes. I turned as I ran, and fired into the ground in front of Kara, who was the closest of our pursuers; but she refused to be frightened and actually plunged through the doorway on our heels.

"I'll tend to her," panted Nikka. "You fasten the door, Jack."

There was a wooden bar, which I dropped into place, and the next minute the framework groaned under a weight of bodies.

"No shooting," yelled Tokalji. "You fools, you'll have the Frank police in here!"

"One hundred Napoleons a head for them," barked Toutou. "Dead or alive."

The uproar redoubled, and then Tokalji evidently invaded the throng hammering at the door.

"Leave that door alone," he snapped. "You're wasting time. Go through the windows."

"Come on, Nikka," I urged. "We can't guard every point. We must run for it."

"But what about this?" demanded Nikka whimsically. He jerked his pistol muzzle at Kara sitting demurely on the floor, playing with her knife. "If we show our backs, she'll knife us or open the door—and besides, where shall we go?"

"Tie her up," I answered impatiently.

Kara, who, of course, could not understand a word of what we were saying, laughed with glee.

"Do you think I am your enemy?" she demanded in the Tzigane dialect. "I tell you I am your friend. See!"

And she tossed her knife across the room.

"I came with you to help you, Giorgi Bordu."

"My name is Nikka Zaranko," he answered shortly.

"What matters your name?" She leaped up and flung her arms around his neck. "It is you I love—not your name."

Nikka eyed me sheepishly across her shoulder.

"See you, little one," he remonstrated, "this is no time for talking of love. We may be dead in five minutes."

"Oh, no," she said, releasing him, nevertheless, "you shall be off and away. I, Kara—" and it was ridiculous how she strutted in the manner of Tokalji, himself—"will set you free—because I love you."

"But I am the enemy of your tribe—your enemy," replied Nikka. "You do not realize what you do."

"I care not who you are," she insisted. "I love you. I care that for the tribe!"

She snapped her fingers.

"But come," she added as a crash sounded outside. "They have broken in a window. Follow me."

She led us into an adjoining room, where in the thickness of the wall a narrow stairway corkscrewed upward, debouching on the upper floor. Here was a long hall, with rooms opening off it, their windows usually on the inner courtyard, the Garden of the Cedars of the First Hugh's Instructions. She turned to the right, and entered one of the rooms. A ladder leaned against the wall below a trap-door in the roof. In a corner stood a bedstead, which she stripped of its clothes, revealing the cords that served for springs.

"Cut those with your knife," she said. "When we take to the roofs we will need them to help us down again."

Nikka did as she directed, while I shut the door, and piled the few articles of furniture against it. Tokalji's men were in full cry downstairs.

"There is more than enough rope here," said Nikka, coiling it on his arm. "Some of it I am going to use for you."

"What?"

Passion dawned in her big eyes.

"You cannot go with us, little one. We have no place to take you. And you do not know me. To-morrow you would cry your eyes out."

"I tell you I love you," she answered proudly. "I, Kara Tokalji."

"The daughter of my deadly enemy," reiterated Nikka.

"Oh, he is not my father," she said lightly. "No, I think I will go with you, Nikka."

"And I think you won't," retorted Nikka, gritting his teeth. "Here, Jack, catch hold."

He cut the rope in two, gave me half, and with the remaining section, approached her. She backed away from him.

"I'm not going to hurt you," pleaded Nikka. "But I must bind you so they will not suspect that you aided us. Don't you see? And we could not run so fast with you."

"I can run as fast as the Frank," she declared. "But—"

"Our enemies will be here in a moment," warned Nikka. She extended her hands, wrists joined together.

"Bind me," she said wearily. "I love you, Nikka Zaranko. If I can help you in no other way, then, I will help you by staying here."

He bound her gently, hand and foot, without a word, and laid her on the floor by the bed. I ascended the ladder, and pushed back the trapdoor.

"You will come again?" she asked, looking up at him with mournful eyes.

"If I do, it will be as an enemy," he returned.

"Your enemies are my enemies," she cried, struggling to a sitting position. "With a woman it is her man who counts. She cares nothing for the tribe—unless it be her man's. Now, you are my man, Nikka Zaranko."

Nikka stooped over her, and I scrambled up on the roof. I believe he kissed her. I heard his feet on the ladder-rungs, and his voice calling back:

"You are a brave girl. We will talk about this some other time, if the stars are kind."

"Oh, we shall meet again," she replied, her cords creak-

ing as she dropped flat on the floor. "I am as sure of it as if Mother Kathene had told me when the sight was on her."

To me he merely said:

"Hurry, Jack! We've lost too much time. Which way?"

But I reached down first, and hauled up the ladder. The door was shaking under a shower of blows. Kara looked interested as my arm appeared, and her lips shaped themselves for a kiss. Then she saw it was I, and scowled.

"Next house," I panted, and we set off across the roof.

To our left was the inner courtyard, a well of darkness in which tinkled the Fountain of the Lion. To our right lay Sokaki Masyeri. Ahead was a drop of ten feet on to the adjoining roof, the difference in height representing the declining slope of the ground. We made it without any difficulty. The people in this house had been aroused by the shooting, and we could hear their voices and movements. But we shuffled on cautiously, until we came to their courtyard, which ran clear from the street-front to the old sea-wall.

"No choice," grunted Nikka. "Here's a chimney. Knot your rope. It can't be more than twenty-five feet to the ground."

"Why not slide directly into the street?" I argued.

"They might catch us coming down. Do as I say, and we can make sure whether the coast is clear before we leave the courtyard."

He went down first, and I followed him, scorching my hands, for the rope was thin and had no knots to check one's descent. I was in mid-air when I heard an exclamation beneath me, and a thud.

"What the devil—" I started to whisper.

"Hsst!" came from Nikka. "Don't say anything."

He was standing over an inert figure lying on the ground beside a half-opened door.

“Did you—”

“No, only belted him over the head with my pistol.”

A woman's voice sounded inside the house, aggressively inquisitive.

“My God!” breathed Nikka. “She'll be out in a minute, and I can't hit her. We've got to try the street.”

We stole through the courtyard to the street-door. Behind us Toutou's house was seething with activity. Somebody, apparently, had just gained the roof. The woman inside the house we had invaded became impatient, and a light showed. My fingers fumbled for the latch; it seemed to me I should never find it. The light wavered into the doorway, and a scream rose shrilly.

“Let me try,” said Nikka. “Here it is!”

He pulled the door toward us very slowly, and we peered into the street. Not a figure showed in the direction of Tokalji's house. Ahead of us only a kerosene lantern burned in front of a coffee-shop on the corner where Sokaki Masyeri curved to the north. And the woman in the doorway of the house behind us was shrieking for dear life.

We sped out into the street, letting the door slam behind us. The noise distracted the attention of the woman from her unconscious husband, and she left him to run after us. We also made the mistake of taking the middle of the way instead of sticking to the shadows under the walls. And we had not gone fifty feet when we were seen by Gypsies on the roof of Tokalji's house, and they, with the woman to help them, cried the rest of the pack hot on our trail.

At the corner by the coffee-shop I looked back and counted six in a tapering string, with more emerging from the courtyard or climbing over the roofs. Luckily for us, however, there was a four-way crossing a hundred yards beyond the coffee-shop, and Nikka turned left, away from Pera, toward which they would expect us to head. We would have been safe then if we had not blundered into a Turkish gendarme. He was naturally suspicious of our

haste, and blocked the narrow way; but I gave him a terrific punch in his fat stomach before he could pull his gun.

We got by, of course, but his roars put the Tziganes right, and they followed the scent instead of losing it as we reckoned they would. The only thing for Nikka to do in the circumstances was to twist and turn without heed to direction and lose both pursuers and ourselves in the breakneck purlieus of Stamboul. He succeeded in shaking off the Gypsies finally, but we were hopelessly astray, and it was past midnight when we found the Khan of the Georgians and staggered through the gate to thread a precarious path between sleeping men, camels, bullocks, asses and horses.

Wasso Mikali awakened with the first knock on his door, and admitted us. Smoking cigarette after cigarette as rapidly as he could roll them, he listened to the story of our adventures with avidity,—although I discovered later that Nikka had suppressed Kara's part—and immediately dispatched his young men to spy around Tokalji's house, and learn the dispositions the enemy were taking. Then he insisted that we should sleep while he kept watch, and the last memory I have of that awful night is of the old Gypsy's figure stretched out on the floor, his back against the bolted door and a cigarette in his mouth.

When we awakened the sun was streaming in through the open door along with all the noises of the Khan and many of its smells. Our guardian had coffee ready for us in a pot on the brazier, and his young men had sent in a report. The women and children had left Tokalji's house under escort of several of the men shortly after dawn. A vigilant guard was being maintained on the entrance, and nobody had come or gone—aside from the party of women and children—since observation had been established. Before sunrise our spies had heard the sounds of digging inside the premises.

Wasso Mikali looked doubtful as he imparted this last information.

"Perhaps they, too, have discovered the location of the treasure," he suggested.

"No," said Nikka, smiling. "They are burying their dead."

"Ha, that is a good thought to hold in the mind," exclaimed the old Gypsy, immensely pleased. "What better pleasure could a man ask than to contemplate his enemies burying their brother that he slew!"

But instead of indulging in this Tzigane pastime we decided to take our European clothing and adjourn to a neighboring Turkish bath where we could remove the evidence of our Gypsy life. Wasso Mikali went with us to carry back to the khan our discarded Gypsy costumes. I urged him to join us in the pool after we had soaked off the top layer of iniquities in a private room; but he shook his head with a grimace of disgust.

"Tell Jakka, O son of my sister," he said, "that I marvel at the way you risk your naked skins. How can a man hope to withstand the cold and heat if he has nothing but clothing to cover him? Too much water is bad for the strongest. It weakens the muscles."

CHAPTER XIX

FIRST CRUISE OF THE CURLEW

“SO far, Jack, you and Mr. Zaranko seem to have had most of the fun,” pronounced my cousin Betty, as we sat at luncheon in the Kings’ private sittingroom in the Pera Palace.

Watkins for the moment acted as butler, and we were safe from inquisitive ears and could talk with freedom.

“What interests me,” said Hugh thoughtfully, “is how many of those Johnnies you scragged last night.”

“Only the one, I think,” replied Nikka.

“You hit another chap,” I reminded him.

“Yes, but two off their strength doesn’t mean any great reduction in their fighting force.”

“Still, counting in those two and the men they sent off with their women, as Nikka’s pals reported, they’ll be a good bit weaker than they were,” argued Hugh.

“Just the same,” insisted Betty, “we ought not to run any unnecessary risks.”

“Who’s we?” I inquired.

“See here, Jack,” she flashed, “because you’re my cousin is no reason why you can bully me. You might as well understand that I am in this, and I am going to have my part in whatever we do.”

“Hear, hear,” Hugh applauded servilely.

Nikka laughed.

“How about it, Vernon?” I demanded of my uncle.

He spread his hands in a gesture of depreciation.

“My dear Jack,” he said, “you evidently have small acquaintance with the younger feminine generation. Betty is of legal age—I trust, my dear, you have no objection

to the revelation of an intimate detail your sex are supposed to cherish in secret?—”

“Not a particle, dad,” Betty responded cheerfully.

“—and within reasonable limits, her judgment is to be depended upon. Moreover, a not unimportant consideration is that she knows how to run a motor, and in our excursions in the *Curlew* her aid has been of some value.”

“Don’t be stuffy, Jack,” urged Hugh. “Give the girl a chance. There are lots of things she can do, short of mixing it with your friend Toutou. I gather that Nikka’s lady friend in the hostile camp was not averse—”

“That’s a different matter,” I interrupted, perceiving the embarrassment on Nikka’s face.

We had slurred over Kara’s personal interest in his fortunes, but even so, the incident, to quote Betty’s analysis, was “romantic to the nth degree.”

“I don’t see that it is,” asserted Betty stubbornly, “and I intend to play my part. You are short-handed—”

“You forget that Nikka has seven men hidden away in Stamboul,” I reminded her.

“On the contrary, I take them into account,” she retorted. “But you have all been saying that it is advisable not to use them, except in a final emergency.”

“That is true,” agreed Nikka. “The more we bring into this row, the noisier it will become. Also, as we decided before, we ought to have an ace or two in the hole. Take my advice. and hang on to Wasso Mikali and his young men to the last.”

“I’m not disputing you,” said Betty, still belligerent. “What you say is only what I’ve been saying. But would you mind telling me why you are so set against using your Gypsies?”

“If we use them there will be killing on a big scale,” said Nikka succinctly. “That sort of thing is bound to become known.”

“I met Riley-Gratton, the O.C. of the M.P.s this morning, and he gave me a wad of town gossip,” cut in

Hugh, "but he didn't say anything about our lads' scrap at Tokalji's house."

"Oh, we can get away with it once or maybe twice," returned Nikka, "but if we keep it up we'll run into trouble."

"No question of it," I said.

"Then what are we arguing about?" demanded Betty.

I laughed.

"Darn it all," I confessed. "You won't let up, will you? Well, have it your own way. What do you want to do?"

"Run you down the Bosphorus after dark for a look at Tokalji's house from the water side," she answered promptly.

Hugh intervened.

"There's no question in the minds of you two chaps but that any attack ought to come from the water front, is there?" he asked.

"It couldn't very well come from the street," replied Nikka. "There's a high, windowless wall and a strong door, and even in that lawless quarter publicity would attend an armed invasion of private property."

"Of course," said Betty, her head in the air, "it couldn't be any other way. Now tell us some more about the hiding-place of the treasure."

Nikka shrugged his shoulders and looked at me.

"What more can we say?" I answered. "There's the courtyard and the red stone."

"It's not hollow, you said?" spoke up King.

"No."

"That would indicate a task of some difficulty in prying loose the covering of the treasure chamber," he remarked.

"We have—or rather, I should say, Betty has—taken precautions to install on board the *Curlew* an equipment of crowbars, pick-axes, shovels, chisels and other tools—"

"—and a knotted rope with a grapnel on the end to help in going up the sea-wall," reminded Betty.

"True, my dear. Your forethought has been admirable. What I was about to say, however, was that a certain amount of time—I fear, perhaps, an inordinate amount of time—will be required to pry loose the covering of the vault. How are we to secure ourselves such an opportunity?"

"By choosing a time when the occupants of the house are off-watch and their numbers diminished," declared Hugh.

"True," agreed Nikka, "yet I confess I don't see how—"

And to make a long story short we hashed it over all afternoon until tea-time, without arriving at any clearer view of the outlook before us. By that time we were sick of the discussion, and voted to suspend. Vernon King and Betty went to a reception at the British High Commissioner's, and the rest of us planned to take a walk on the chance of running into Wasso Mikali, who had promised to come over to Pera in the afternoon if his spies picked up any additional information.

The first person we saw in the hotel lobby was Montey Hilyer. He hailed us in front of the booking-office.

"I say, Chesby," he drawled in tones that reached all the bystanders, "I don't know what sort of a lark you fellows were up to last night, but really, you know, you can't take liberties with natives in the East—and especially, with their women. Really, old chap, you ought to be careful. In your place, I think I'd clear out of Constantinople. No knowing what kind of trouble you may get into."

Hugh was furious. He looked Hilyer up and down with cold scorn.

"Are you taking a flyer in blackmail, by any chance?" he asked deliberately.

"Not yet," answered Hilyer cheerfully. "No knowing, though. Matter of fact, at present, I'm protecting some poor natives who fear they are going to be victimized by a gang of foreigners."

"Well, whatever you are doing, I should prefer that you keep away from me in the future," said Hugh. "I can't afford to have the Jockey Club stewards hear that I've been talking to you."

As it happened, the one episode in Hilyer's piebald past that irked his pride and aroused sore memories was his suspension from the privileges of the turf. He was cynically indifferent to every other charge brought against him. But the man was a sincere horseman, his racing ventures had been the breath of life to him, his disgrace and compulsion to enter his thoroughbreds under other men's colors had been a bitter blow. And he showed this feeling now. His face went dead-white; his nostrils pinched in.

"All right, Chesby," he said curtly, "I won't forget that."

And he disappeared into the bar.

"Curse the rotter," muttered Hugh. "I'm glad something will flick him on the raw."

"You were hard on him," said Nikka seriously. "After all, why should you mind anything that he can say?"

"He was hoping that Miss King was within hearing distance," retorted Hugh. "He said what he did deliberately to smear smut on all of us. A dog like that doesn't deserve consideration."

"Some people believe a dog does deserve consideration, Lord Chesby," said a feminine voice behind us.

We turned to face Hélène de Cespedes. The Countess Sandra Vassilievna was with her. Maude Hilyer, her face as ghastly as her husband's, was hurrying away from them.

"You may be enemies, but why should you make a woman cry?" added the Russian girl. "She will be unhappy for the rest of the day."

"I'm very sorry," answered Hugh stiffly, "but do you sincerely believe that her husband is entitled to insult me in public?"

"It was a rotten thing he said," admitted H  l  ne frankly. "And of course, he is a rotter. But as I told you boys once, they are a queer pair, and Maudey—well, she really thinks that if they ever get to a state of affluence, they can both turn around and live straight. It's damned silly, but—do you believe in fairies? Those who don't, generally envy those who do."

"We don't believe in fairies," I answered good-temperedly, "and we also don't believe in letting a man who is a thief get away with a gratuitous insult."

"Oh, you're right," said Sandra Vassilievna impartially, "from your own point of view. But I'm going up to tell Maudey that she'll only ruin her complexion if she weeps for what an offensively honest man says to her."

H  l  ne laughed as the Russian walked off.

"Women are almost as funny as men, aren't they?" she said. "Oh, say, before I forget it, Mr. Nash, you want to look out for that girl's brother. You slammed him one or two in that fight at Chesby, and he's had it in for you ever since. And after last night, all the men are wild. If that Gypsy Tokalji catches you—phew! Oh, boy! And Toutou!"

"They weren't able to catch us last night," returned Nikka. "They aren't likely to have as good a chance again."

"You put up a great fight," she agreed. "Oh, I'm handing it to you, all of you! You're the best little bunch I ever ran across. Say, I wouldn't believe an English lord could be as much of a hustler as you, Lord Chesby. Your uncle, he—"

She shrugged.

"What about my uncle?" asked Hugh eagerly. "D'you mind telling how your push got on to him?"

"N-no, I suppose there's no harm now," she answered slowly. "Poor old fellow! I was darned sorry he was croaked. We none of us—Well, what's the use talking? That Toutou is a devil. Mr. Nash knows it. I only hope

he and the rest of you don't get to know him any better. But about your uncle, Lord Chesby. He was a cinch. He ran around here like a kid in a game of 'Cops-and-thieves.' Everybody knew he was up to something. The authorities thought he was just a nut. But when he took to snooping around Tokalji's house, our folks got wise to it he might be on to something good. Tokalji's tribe have always had this tradition of a treasure—But you know about that. Tokalji had been working with us since before the War, and he realized this was more than he could tackle by himself, so he called on Toutou. The rest is what's going to happen."

"And that?" asked Hugh, grinning.

"My dear young lord, you'll lose your shirt—if not your life," she retorted airily.

"Tough luck," said Hugh, "but your people have got to do better, in that case."

"You're dead right," she agreed. "Say, Mr. Zaranko, on the level now, did that girl of Tokalji's sell out to you last night?"

Nikka stared at her blankly, his face a perfect mask.

"We had a good deal of trouble with her," he returned.

"Had to tie her up. She was right on our heels, with her knife."

Hélène shook her head.

"Ye-es, that's true, but—I saw her this morning. Humph! Maybe I'm a fool. I told Toutou to mind his own business, and not mix into the tribe's affairs. Tokalji said she was all right, and that ought to be enough."

"God help Toutou if he went after her," I said facetiously.

Hélène gave me a quick glance.

"Maybe you're right," she said. "I've often wondered what Toutou would do against a woman who used a knife. He—he gets 'em in a different way. Well, I'm babbling, which is a sign of old age. Be good, boys, and

give up before you get into serious trouble. As ever, your well-wisher, Hélène."

And she tripped off.

"What a delightful criminal," I remarked. "Somehow I don't mind so much the idea of being plucked by her."

"You're losing your perspective," growled Hugh, who was in a righteous frame of mind, partly because he was in love and partly because of his clash with Hilyer. "A crook is a crook. They're all against us. I don't know but that the women are the most dangerous where you are concerned, Jack. Why are you so damned susceptible?"

At which I laughed. Nikka, walking beside us, had no ears for our conversation. His thoughts were on that slim, brown Tzigane maid about whom Hélène de Céspedes had inquired. But he woke up a block farther on, when a big, turbanned figure shambled past us, with a guttural exclamation from the corner of his mouth. At the next corner there was a traffic block, and we grouped casually around Wasso Mikali.

"Tokalji's women and children are in camp beyond Boghazkeui on the edge of the Forest of Belgrade," he murmured, staring at a fat Turkish Pasha who was rolling by in a Daimler. "There are five men with them. Five other men have left Sokaki Masyeri since morning. If Franks were there they have gone."

"It is good, my uncle," returned Nikka, affecting to speak to Hugh. "Continue the watch. If there is more to report bid one of your young men lounge before the khan where we are staying to-morrow in the forenoon."

"It shall be done," said the old man, and he elbowed his way through our ranks as though in haste to cross over.

I looked behind us for the inevitable spies. There were several Levantines in European dress and tarboosh on the corner—and Hilmi Bey, who pretended that he was not noticing us. His attitude was that of scorning to spy and

hating to have it supposed that he could demean himself to so plebeian a phase of crime. I called a greeting to him in derision.

"Are you walking our way?" I asked.

"I have a house in the Rue Midhat Pasha," he answered effusively. "I am going to visit my wives. It is a long time since I have seen them. Don't let me detain you, gentlemen. I turn right at the opposite corner."

"A vain dog," commented Nikka, sourly watching Hilmi's plump back. "He was afraid to be caught in such an ordinary undertaking."

"Well," said Hugh, whose temper had improved, "it goes to show that criminals are human beings. Every one of these birds seems to have some sense of shame if you can only pick out the right point of contact."

We led our escorts—for we took it for granted that we were under observation—a dilatory stroll, and arrived back at the Pera Palace in time for dinner, which, as usual, we had served in the King's sitting room. It was a leisurely meal, for we had time to kill. There was an early moon, and we wanted it to set before the *Curlew* left the Golden Horn.

After Watkins had brought the coffee, Betty excused herself. She returned in a quarter of an hour dressed in a warm sport suit instead of the light evening frock she had worn, and carrying two boxes of cartridges.

"Have you all got your pistols loaded?" she inquired. "Watkins? Daddy?"

"I think so, my dear," answered her father absent-mindedly. "I wish, Jack, that you had observed more carefully the carvings on that colonnade. It may be truly ancient or—What? What is it, Betty?"

She deftly frisked him, and examined his automatic.

"Yes, it's all right," she said, returning it to him. "And for Heaven's sake remember, Dad, that the safety lock is on. Here's an extra clip. Watkins?"

Watkins set down the tray of coffee-cups, and cautiously hauled his weapon from his hip-pocket.

"Quite right, I think, ma'am, Miss King," he replied.

"Here's an extra clip for you, too. Boys?"

"You don't catch old campaigners like us with empty weapons," I jeered. "It isn't we who'll be getting into trouble."

"I wish I could be sure of that," she retorted. "Most likely I'll be trying to pull you out of a scrape twenty-four hours from now. But let's get started. We have a car at the side entrance to run us down to the Man-o'-war Landing, where the *Curlew* is moored."

If the spies were still watching the hotel, as I have no doubt they were, we gave them the slip. We went downstairs together, and shot into the closed car which was in waiting, Watkins sitting beside the chauffeur. Ten minutes later we drew up on the *Curlew's* dock, secure from observation because of the British marine sentries who stood guard at the dock-gates.

The *Curlew* was a handy craft, decked over forward, with a roomy cockpit and a good, heavy-duty Mercedes engine. She was nothing to look at, but reliable and efficient. Betty, who was an experienced yachtswoman, automatically assumed command, and Hugh and Watkins as automatically accepted the rôle of crew. Vernon King, Nikka and I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible.

"Lay for'ard, Hugh, and slack off that bow-line," ordered Betty energetically. "How is the engine, Watkins? Very well, turn it over."

There was a splutter, and then the steady "put-put-put."

"Cast off that bow-line, Hugh! Lay aft, Watkins. Is the stern-line slack? Pay out! Let go! Get out from under my feet, Jack. No, Daddy, you can't have a cigar—nothing but running-lights. I'd douse those if I weren't afraid of the Navy people. Mr. Zaranko, d'you mind

dropping into the cabin and taking a look at the tools we laid in?"

We chugged slowly through the glut of shipping in the Golden Horn, edging away from the Galata shore toward the picturesque bulk of Stamboul. Seraglio Point loomed ahead of us, high, rugged, tree-covered, dotted with infrequent lights. We rounded it, the lighthouse twinkling on our starboard beam, and turned southwest into the Bosphorus, with the wide sweep of the Marmora just ahead. To port the outline of Scutari and the suburbs on the Asiatic shore showed dimly. To starboard Stamboul towered, white and ghostly and serenely beautiful, more than ever the magic city of the Arabian Nights. The steamer from Rodosto and other Marmoran ports steamed past us with a swash and gurgle. A belated fishing-boat flapped by. Then we had the waters to ourselves.

"Have you the night-glasses, Hugh?" questioned Betty. "See if you can make out the St. Sophia minarets." And to us: "That's our first landfall in making Tokalji's house. Watkins, I think it ought to be safe now to douse the running-lights."

Hugh leaned forward across the cabin-roof, resting on his elbows, eyes glued to the glasses.

"Right O," he called back. "I'm on them—and I can see that big old tower of the sea-walls that lies this side of the jetty."

Betty cut off the engine.

"Fetch the sweeps, Watkins," she whispered. "We'll pull in. Quiet, everybody."

CHAPTER XX

OUT OF LUCK

HUGH and Watkins unlashed two heavy oars from the cabin roof and thrust them outboard through oarlocks rivetted to the cockpit railing. Side by side, in unison, they pulled with a long, deliberate stroke, while Betty steered. It was no easy task to move that launch across the swift-flowing tide of the Bosphorus, and it seemed an endless time before the blurred mass of the shoreline, becoming visible to our unaided sight, furnished an index to the progress we were making.

"Nikka and I can relieve them," I offered as the rowers began to pant.

"You haven't done it before," answered Betty shortly. "You might splash."

Indeed, the oars made scarcely a ripple as they were lifted, feathered and dipped, tedious as was the effort imposed both by their weight and the size of the launch.

"Much farther?" Hugh gritted between clenched teeth.

"The jetty is right ahead," Betty reassured him. "You had better get for'ard, Dad, and be ready to fend off the rocks."

Vernon King climbed up on the cabin roof and crawled into the bow. Nikka and I strained our eyes endeavoring to identify the details of the shore. To the right, and already a little astern of us, was a huge round tower, one of the bulwarks of the ancient walls. Other than this there was only a dim range of masonry, the city walls, for the most part, crowned by houses. Not a light showed opposite to us.

Presently, letting our eyes drop lower, we descried im-

mediately in front a low breakwater, a jagged pile of rocks that ran out from the shore in the form of a blunted hook. Betty, steering carefully, brought the *Curlew* inside the hook and bow-on to the shore, so that the launch was protected from the current that flowed through the Strait. King scrambled ashore and made fast a line around one of the rocks, then felt his way back along the slippery footing of the breakwater and stepped into the cockpit. Hugh and Watkins unshipped the sweeps and laid them on the cabin roof.

All of us were staring at the blank darkness of the shoreline, tense and watchful; but my uncle's interest was still largely of an antiquarian nature.

"Do you appreciate how extraordinarily fortunate we are to have this ruined jetty to moor to?" he whispered excitedly. "No galleys in the old days were ever able to assail these seaward walls because of the currents. Without protection, we, too, should be smashed to pieces if we tried to lie under them. But this place evidently was one of the walls of a harbor for the Imperial galleys. It was, of course, fortified. This hook terminated in a strong tower. A second hook—"

"Daddy, Daddy," remonstrated Betty, "you aren't lecturing to-night. We—we're reconnoitering the enemy's position."

Hugh had been studying the shore again through the night-glasses.

"Not a sign of life," he murmured. "Now, you chaps, show us the lay of the land."

Nikka and I, with the help of the glasses, plotted for the others the arrangement of Tokalji's establishment. There was the brick extension of the bachelors' quarters, crowning a part of the sea-wall. There was the gap between this structure and the House of the Married, which was shut in only by the crenellated height of the wall. And finally, there was the House of the Married, with the Garden of the Cedars concealed within its heart, lifting its solid

bulk above all adjoining buildings. There were no windows on the seaward face of Tokalji's house.

"The old wall between the two wings—between the bachelors' quarters and warehouse and the House of the Married—ought to be easy to climb," I concluded.

"The wall of the House of the Married is very irregular, too," added Betty. "We have passed it close in a number of times by daylight, and we all agreed an active man could climb it."

"That's a good idea," approved Nikka. "If you could enter by the House of the Married you could seize the valuable part of the position first. Sound military strategy."

"Yes," assented Hugh, "you could consolidate your position—how the old lingo comes back, though!—and then occupy the rest of the place as convenient. By jove, if you didn't want to occupy it, you could—"

"Oh, you'd have to occupy it," I interrupted. "I say, do you know that place looks deserted?"

"There's somebody there, never fear," rejoined Betty.

"According to Nikka's uncle, a good part of the garrison were withdrawn to-day," returned Hugh.

"There is no use hurrying," cautioned my uncle. "We shall have plenty of opportunities."

"There is good reason for striking when you are not expected," retorted Hugh.

Nobody answered him. We were all staring hungrily at the shadowy shape of the House of the Married, towering above the seawall. It hypnotized us. We were enthralled by the unfathomable mysteries it suggested, by the knowledge of the mighty prize it contained.

"There's no time like the present," I said softly.

"Yes, they won't be looking for us so soon again," agreed Nikka. "They will be figuring that we had enough of a fright last night."

"Perhaps you are right," surrendered Vernon King. "Audacity, we are frequently told, is the favored bride of

fortune. I must admit that this place exerts a lure which arouses in me certain primitive instincts I had supposed were finally cured or buried."

"You mean, Dad," said Betty, "that you feel like being foolish with the others."

"Oh, come, Bet," protested Hugh, "this is no time for squabbling. What could be more unexpected than a raid from us to-night? They probably think, as Nikka says, that we will go slow after last night, and they don't even know we are out here."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," rejoined Betty.

"Besides," I said, "their force is so depleted that we couldn't have a better opportunity."

"They may be reinforced."

"Nonsense," said Hugh. "Watty, bring out those tools. We shall want the rope for climbing and a couple of crow-bars. If we need anything else we can send back for it."

Watkins, who had preserved a respectful silence throughout our debate, cleared his throat apologetically.

"I beg your ludship's pardon, but—but—you'll not be going into that den of thieves at this hour of the night, sir?"

"Certainly, Watty. It will be easier 'at this hour of the night' than in broad daylight."

"But—but—your ludship! Mister Hugh, sir! It's flying in the face of Providence, if I may say so—after what 'appened to Mister Jack and Mister Nikka, sir—there's no knowing what those devils 'ave waitin' for you."

I am ashamed to say that we all chuckled as loudly as we dared at Watkins's fears.

"You can stay in the boat with Miss Betty, if you'd rather," said Hugh.

Without a word, Watkins dropped down the cabin hatchway.

"Why do you single me out to be left behind?" demanded Betty indignantly.

"Because, Betty, you can't climb that wall—and somebody has got to be ready to start the engine and get us away in a hurry."

"I suppose you're right," she sighed. "Well, don't blame me if anything goes wrong. Of all the hare-brained—"

"Rats!" I scoffed. "If they jump us, and there are too many of them, we'll retreat. But maybe we can clean up this job to-night for good and all. If we can, it's worth trying."

Watkins emerged from the cabin with the tools and the expression of a martyr. Nikka insisted that he was the best climber in the party, and took charge of the rope. Hugh and I carried the crowbars, which we wrapped in sailcloth to prevent their clinking against the stones of the wall. Then we stepped on to the slimy rocks of the jetty, Nikka in the lead.

It was a perilous climb to the shore, and we negotiated it slowly, helping one another and taking every precaution to avoid making any noise. At last we found ourselves in the jumble of bowlders constituting the breakwater at the foot of the sea-wall, which reared its moss-grown battlements high overhead. We turned to the left here, and crawled over and through the rocks on the beach to a point under the overhanging wall of the House of the Married. From the beach it looked unclimbable, but Nikka, after surveying its mounting courses, shattered and riven by centuries of neglect, by earthquakes and the ceaseless battering of the waves, removed his shoes and started the ascent, an end of the grapnel-rope looped around his waist.

We who watched him stood with knocking hearts for what seemed an eternity. Spread-eagled against the wall, he appeared as infinitesimal as a fly in the darkness. At

first we could see him when he slipped and caught himself or sprawled or clutched for handholds. But soon he became an indistinct blotch on the masonry, and we held our breath, helpless now to aid him. Our first knowledge that he had succeeded came when he jerked up the grapnel lying on the beach at our feet. He hoisted it slowly, lest it clash against the wall, adjusted its prongs and tossed down the knotted length of rope.

Hugh followed him with ease, bracing his feet against the wall when he was tired. Then I went up. Then my uncle. Watkins came last. We stood, bending low, on the seaward verge of the roof over which Nikka and I had fled the previous night. It was now well towards midnight, and a haze was settling over the city. The *Curlew* was invisible even to us who knew precisely her location. The large courtyard to our right was a mere blot; the Garden of the Cedars in front of us was marked by the whispering tops of its two trees. The silence was absolute. The water lapped on the beach below. That was all.

Naturally and by right, Hugh took command. It was his expedition.

"Do we go down through the trapdoor Jack and Nikka used or do we use the rope to drop directly into the Garden?" he asked.

"Best use the trapdoor," advised Nikka.

"Yes," I agreed. "Then the rope will always be handy in case you want to escape."

"Right O!" endorsed Hugh cheerfully. "Jack, you and Nikka will come with me. Professor King and Watty will be rearguard and second-line for emergency use. Stay where you are, Professor, until you hear from us."

"But do you consider it advisable, in full accord with military strategy, to divide your forces?" objected my uncle. "Surely—"

"We can handle twice our number," replied Hugh. "If there are more than that we'll call on you. But you and

Watty aren't as used to scrapping as we are, and it wouldn't be fair to mix you in it if it can be avoided. Come on, lads."

We crossed the roof toward Sokaki Masyeri, the large courtyard on our right, the Garden of the Cedars on our left. The trapdoor was shut, but unfastened, and Hugh lifted it. The ladder was in place under it. Hugh lowered himself gently, and creaked down to the floor. We followed him. The room was in pitch-darkness, but we made certain by touch that it was empty. The bed from which Nikka and I had cut the cords lay exactly as we had left it, the clothes tumbled over the foot. The door to the hall was off its hinges, but propped in place.

"I've picked up a chair-leg," Nikka whispered by the broken door. "You fellows use your crowbars if—"

He paused significantly.

"Right," Hugh whispered back. "Can we lift this door aside?"

The hinges rattled slightly as we shifted it. The next moment we peered through a yawning cavity, ears alert. Not a sound reached us, and we stole forward with the utmost care. Midway of the hall were the corkscrew stairs up which Kara had guided Nikka and me. I judged we were close to them when a door jarred beside us. There was a shout, and we were surrounded by a mob of half-seen figures. They poured from the head of the stairs as well as from the rooms opening off the hall in which they had lain concealed. They were all around us, but in the darkness they got in each other's way, and I thought we could beat them off.

A man seized me by the shoulder, and I drove my fist into his face. Two others leaped on me. I cracked the skull of one with my crowbar, and broke the arm of the second. Hugh in front of me was driving his opponents down the stairs. I heard Nikka exclaim once, then a gasp—and a light flashed, three lights flashed. Hugh had cleared a space, but went down as I looked, throttled from

behind. Nikka was just rising from beside a man whose head was crushed in. Then the rush began again.

I reached for my pistol, but did not have time to draw it. The attackers surged in from all sides. I had a fleeting glimpse of Hilmi Bey. Serge Vassilievich ran up the stair. I heard somewhere the snarling voice of Toutou LaFitte.

"Jack, hold them for me!" cried Nikka. "Must warn—King!"

I swung my crowbar in a circle, and backed towards Nikka's voice. He had shaken himself clear.

"In that door—opposite—reach window!" he gasped.

We charged and split a path toward the door of one of the rooms. As we reached it, a pair of gorilla-like arms wound around my neck. I tried to hit over my shoulder with the crowbar, but somebody caught my wrist. As I fell I heard Nikka's cry:

"Run, Professor! Save Betty! We're—"

That was all. Toutou had me on the floor and was choking the life out of me. I lost consciousness.

When I came to I was lying on a very damp, hard floor. Several lights dazzled my aching eyes, and a number of people were talking in French.

"Ha, Nash is with us again," said Hilyer's voice. "I was afraid you might have done him in, Toutou."

"If you take my advice,"—I recognized Hilmi Bey's falsetto tones—"you will have Toutou operate on all three of them. He has ways to make silent men speak. Do you remember Rattner, the Swiss broker, Toutou?"

Toutou's answer was an almost indistinguishable "guhr-rrrr-rrr-rr" of rage.

Alive now to the position I was in, I opened my eyes wider and tried to rise. But I was bound hand and foot, and could not move. I could, however, see where I was. Not far away Hugh and Nikka were propped against the stone wall of a chamber, which I suppose you could call a dungeon. It had no window. The one door was open.

The floor sloped gradually toward the center, where there was a square stone grating about two feet square.

But the most interesting aspect of my surroundings was the group in the doorway. Toutou stood in front, his green eyes sparkling with hate and lust. Hilmi Bey fawned at his elbow. Serge Vassilievich and Hilyer were there. Tokalji frowned at us, hand on his knife-hilt, H  l  ne de Cespedes and Sandra Vassilievna, in their modish costumes, looked singularly out of place. They lent a touch of unreality to what was otherwise a singularly brutish picture. As I looked, H  l  ne stepped forward.

"Help Mr. Nash to sit up, Montey," she said.

He looked from her to Toutou.

"Oh, it won't prevent his answering questions," she snapped. "Please do as I say."

He raised me not ungently to a sitting position. Hugh and Nikka grinned at me.

"The question before the house," said Hugh, "is what route to Hades we are to take, and the preliminary stages of discomfort we shall undergo to satisfy the head devil over there and his assistants."

"You are in a serious fix," continued H  l  ne. "Joking won't help you any. I've tried to make you boys understand that the Boches were merciful enemies compared to us. We don't recognize civilization. For us it doesn't exist. We have gone back to primal principles. Now we've got you, and you've got to talk."

"Words, words," lamented Hilmi viciously. "Let Toutou take his knife to them. That will do the trick."

Tokalji evidently understood the purport of this, for he rasped a quick assent. Toutou flashed a long, stiletto-like blade, and stepped toward us.

"I'll carve them," he purred. "They do not look now as they will when I have finished with them. Ha, yes, Toutou's knife knows the way to truth. Soon they will be asking to die."

But Hilyer jumped in front of him. The Englishman's thin face was aflame with temper.

"I'll stand for a good deal," he said, "but I won't permit torture. You are a fool, Toutou. You'd only kill them the way you did the old lord. Here, you people, we must call him off. He'll spoil the whole show."

Sandra backed him up, and compelled her brother somewhat sullenly to join in the protest. But Hilmi Bey and Tokalji energetically took the opposing side.

"They have killed three more of my men," howled the Gypsy. "Shall they sow death through my tribe, and live unharmed?"

"They shall," declared Hélène calmly.

She stepped beside Toutou, and placed her fingers on his wrist. Her eyes sought his. He snarled in his cat-like fashion, and drew away from her. But she fearlessly came closer to him, and slowly, under the compulsion of her fingers, he returned the knife to its sheath.

"Hilmi Bey!" she rapped.

The Levantine bowed before her.

"If you spoil this play," she said coldly, "I will kill you with my own hand. Keep out of what concerns your betters, pig!"

He cringed to her, and would have answered. But she silenced him with a wave of the hand.

"There has been enough of this," she went on. "Mr. Nash, do you join with your friends in refusing to give up your secret?"

I nodded.

"Very well," she answered, "we will leave you to think it over. If you are wise, you will understand that having blundered into this trap—as you must have blundered sooner or later—the best you can hope for is life in exchange for what we want. I cannot continue to save you from the cruelty of those of us who relish brutal measures. There is a limit to my patience, too. I advise you to make intelligent use of the next twenty-four hours.

You cannot be saved. Your friends cannot reach you. The authorities cannot intervene. If they did, you would disappear. You have twenty-four hours more."

They took all the lanterns, except one, and went out, locking the door after them.

CHAPTER XXI

WATKINS TO THE RESCUE

“WELL, this is a nice mess I got you chaps into,” said Hugh unhappily. “It’s not your fault any more than it is ours,” returned Nikka. “We walked squarely into a trap and were bagged. That’s all.”

“Were they ready for us?” I asked with what interest my aching head would permit.

Hugh laughed with hollow mirth.

“That girl Hélène has an uncanny mind. She told the others, when their trailers reported they had lost us, to watch out for a raid on Tokalji’s premises. They were so exultant over it that they blabbed everything. They didn’t hear the *Curlew* or see her. They didn’t know we were here until we raised the trapdoor. But they were prepared for us no matter which way we came. They had brought in every man they could trust. We didn’t have a chance.”

“Did the Kings and Watty get away?”

“Must have. Hélène and the others said nothing about them.”

“I hope they will not try anything foolish in the way of a rescue,” said Nikka. “If Wasso Mikali establishes touch with them, I am afraid they may be tempted to do something.”

“There is nothing they can do,” answered Hugh. “Our goose is cooked. We’re kaput, finished. As Hélène said, if the O. C. of the Forces of Occupation jammed his way in here, they could make a clean sweep of us. They might—”

He hesitated.

"—they might drop us down that grating in the floor, toss us into the Bosphorus the way Abdul the Damned used to dispose of his enemies. There are lots of things they could do with us. They will think that even if they have to scrag us they will still have the Kings and Watty to work on."

"Don't be too comforting," I observed with feeble sarcasm.

Nikka roused himself.

"There is no sense in abandoning hope," he remarked. "Is this any worse than that pill-box at Le Ferriere?"

"Good old Nikka," said Hugh affectionately. "I say, if I had to make an ass of myself I'd rather do it with two such prime—"

"Asses?" I suggested.

"—Not even to you would I say that, 'Jack,' he retorted. "By the way, lads, we're not running true to form. In every tale I ever read in which brave, resourceful men were made prisoners, they gnawed each other's ropes and so gained their freedom."

Nikka chuckled at this.

"If I tried to reach either of you I'd roll over on my face," he said. "I've already tested the knots around my wrists. It would take a strong man half an hour to untie them, and a very sharp knife to hack through them. The only way we shall be freed is by help from outside."

"That means not at all," replied Hugh. "Let's try for a nap. It must be some hours to daylight yet—not that that matters any in this dark hole."

We slept fitfully, frightfully harassed by the curtailment of circulation due to the straitness of our bonds and the discomfort of our positions which we might not change. Hugh fell over in his sleep, and awakened Nikka and me with his groans as he endeavored to roll off his face. By persistent efforts he finally succeeded in getting on his

back; but he was obliged to stay there, and advised us to retain our sitting positions if we could.

Of course, we had no means of estimating the passage of time, but we figured it was well into the forenoon when we abandoned further efforts for sleep. Nobody came to us, and we began to be aware of the pangs of hunger and thirst. At first we paid little attention to this hardship, but as the hours dragged along we realized that our desertion could mean only one thing: that our enemies were determined to assail our courage with every weapon they had. And to tell the truth, courage became something to grapple for after your belly turned upside down for emptiness and your tongue commenced to thicken. To add to our misery, the one lantern flickered out with a rancid stench of oil, and several rats discovered us. They feared us, perhaps, as much as we feared them. But their scamperings and sorties were nerve-racking, and we expected every moment to feel their sharp teeth in our wrists and ankles.

For a while we talked and sang and told stories, but our cracked lips and swollen tongues soon felt the strain of vocal effort. What the others did then I don't know, but I fell asleep—to awaken suddenly with a gasp of agony as I lost my balance and fell sideways, striking my head on the stone floor.

"Too bad," came Hugh's voice from the darkness, strangely muffled. "Hit your head, Jack?"

"Yes," I moaned.

"Twenty-four hours must be nearly up," croaked Nikka.

I fought for a while to work over on to my back, but my limbs had become so stiff that I could not. I had to lie on my stomach, with my head resting, now on one cheek, now on the other. In this position, ear to the floor, it seemed to me that I heard a clink of metal, not outside the door of the dungeon, but somewhere underneath. I asked the others if they heard it, but they said

no, and I could tell from their pitying tones that they thought I was becoming delirious.

Yet again I heard it, and almost immediately afterward a wholly different sound: footsteps approaching the door. The two noises persisted together until the dungeon door was thrown open with a clatter. I forgot all about the first noise in the sight of Toutou LaFitte, standing by himself in the doorway, his shirt-sleeves rolled up and a grin of horrible anticipation distorting his beautiful face.

It was as though a mask of animal hunger cloaked his features. Their regularity was undisturbed. Each was in its usual place and relation to the rest, but their effect was entirely abnormal. They were warped and twisted by passions that must have rocked the foundations of the man's soul. His green eyes radiated an unholy light. His long arms were crooked and extended, his hands open and prehensile fingers hooked. He walked warily, bent-kneed, slowly. A slight trickle of saliva flowed from the corner of his mouth.

In the doorway he stood motionless for a moment, surveying the three of us. Then he advanced, leaving the door open against the wall, and unhooked the stable-lantern which hung from his belt. He placed this close to the grating, and prowled over to where I lay.

I say "prowled," and I mean just that. He walked like a big forest cat, or, rather, like a gorilla, investigating a likely meal awaiting the kill. When he stood by me, I felt up and down my spine the shiver of apprehension, of sheer horror, that I had known before in his proximity. When he turned me on my back, and his powerful hands, with their smooth fingers and polished nails, explored my muscles, I could have screamed with terror. I twitched at his touch, with an involuntary exclamation of repugnance. He snarled, and his fingers pressed on a nerve of the upper arm, with a force that made me faint.

But almost at once he flung me from him, and walked across to Hugh, who met him unflinchingly.

"I take it, Monsieur Toutou," said Hugh, "that the twenty-four hours are up."

Toutou stood over him, with that peculiarly animal, bent-kneed posture of meditated attack, arms flexed forward.

"Not quite," he answered in the throaty, guttural voice that I always identified with him. "But we are tired of waiting."

He swooped and snatched Hugh into his arms, just as a gorilla might, squeezing ferociously. Hugh's face showed above his shoulder, white and beaded with perspiration. I thought the fiend intended to crush Hugh's ribs, but he ceased as suddenly as he had begun and tossed his victim down on the floor again.

"You shall come last," he growled. "First, you shall see your friends suffer."

Hugh was too weak from the handling he had just experienced and the shock of his fall to see what happened next, but I did. Toutou leaped on Nikka with one tigerish spring, lifting him to his feet and propping him against the wall. Then he prodded Nikka from head to foot, testing out muscles and joints, all the time growling in his throat. He did not hurt him, simply felt of him as though to determine the parts of his body which would be juiciest.

Nikka's face showed revulsion, but no fear.

"Do you eat men, Toutou?" he gibed.

Toutou flashed his knife, and I closed my eyes, thinking to see the torture begin. But when I opened them again, the knife was slashing the ropes that bound Nikka's limbs. For a second I credited the incredible. Were we to be set free? But no. Toutou sheathed the knife, and crouched before Nikka once more, animal-like, menacing.

"I am a bone-breaker," he rasped. "I break men, bone by bone, joint by joint. Have you ever felt your bones

breaking, your sinews cracking? Guuhhrr-rrrr-rrr-rr!"

He pounced, and Nikka screamed, screamed in an excess of agony as the beast's fingers sank into his shoulder, torturing the nerves, tearing the sinews and muscles, dragging the bone from its socket.

But there was another cry from the open door. With a whirl of skirts a slight figure darted in, a knife gleamed and plunged home, and Toutou started back from his victim, his own left arm dripping blood. His face was a queer mixture of rage, lust and puzzled alarm. Shaking his head, with the saliva trickling down his chin, he stood, frowning, like an animal more than ever, an animal which had been curbed and chastised. And before him, knife in one hand, pistol in the other, stood Kara, her eyes blazing with passion, breast heaving through the rags of her bodice, her slender body quivering with anger.

"You would dare!" she cried shrilly. "You would dare to touch my man! No man lives who can touch him while I live. He is mine, I say! Mine! I will cut your throat, big French pig. I will carve out your bowels! I will pick out your eyes! I will, I say! I will!"

She danced toward him so energetically that he cowered and gave ground before her.

"Go!" she cried, gesturing with her pistol toward the door. "Quick, before I strike!" And she leaped at him. He clutched his wounded arm, and retreated. "Go, I say!" She raised her arm to stab him again. "Did you think I would let you touch *him*? Did not the others say that you should only harm one of them? And you took my man! Oh, I will cut you in ribbons!"

And this time he turned, and fled through the door, slamming it behind him. She was swift on his heels, jerked open the door and ran out into the passage after him.

"Run!" I heard her shout. "I am close to you! I, Kara Tokalji! My knife is at your back. Make haste—"

Then the door swung to, and shut out the echoes of

Toutou's retreat. My whole thought was of Nikka, his face green in the lantern-light, his empty stomach retching with the nausea from horrible pain. Hugh called to him:

"Nikka, old chap! Pull yourself together. Can you get me unfastened? I'll see what I can do for—"

But I promptly lost interest in Nikka's plight. For my ear, that I could not lift from the floor, registered once more that peculiar clinking underground, this time more pronounced and nearer. I peered idly along the floor, watched a rat flit from hole to hole, and then stiffened with amazement as the grating in the middle of the room lifted two or three inches. It thudded into place again with a shower of dust, but at once the clinking was resumed, and the heavy stonework was pried upward.

"Hugh!" I whispered. "Nikka! My God, look at the grating! Do you see what I see?"

Nikka was still too sick to understand, but Hugh stared at the grating, and his eyes popped from his head as he perceived its unsteady progress upward.

We were both afraid to speak, afraid to guess what it might mean. And while we still watched, uncertainly, wondering whether to hope or to fear, we heard a loud grunt, the grating rose into the air, tottered and fell out of place, leaving the drain only half-covered. The end of a steel crowbar appeared in this opening, there was another grunt, and the grating was levered aside.

"Where's that 'ere dratted box?" muttered a familiar voice. "If the Servants' 'All could see me now!"

Two hands clutched the sides of the drain opening, the grunt was repeated for the third time—and Watkins clambered laboriously into the dungeon.

"If your ludship will pardon me a minute," he puffed. "This work does fair do me up—at my time of life and all, Mister Hugh, sir—and the rats down there are as big as old Tom the mouser in the dairy at Chesby."

We could only stare at him. Even poor Nikka forgot

his agony and peered unbelievably at this extraordinary apparition.

"'As that Tootoo gone, your ludship?" continued Watkins, looking around.

He drew a pistol from his coat pocket.

"Miss Betty told me to be sure not to shoot if I could 'elp it. But I would 'ave taken a crack at 'im, only I couldn't rightly see down below there, and I was afraid 'e'd tumble to me if 'e 'eard me like, so—"

"For God's sake, Watty, where did you come from?" burst from Hugh.

"From the drain, your ludship. I nearly broke my neck in the opening last night account of coming down the rope so sudden with the Professor, and when I told Miss Betty she said it was a gift from 'Eaven and we must come back, which we did, your ludship."

"Do you mean to say," asked Hugh, "that there's a passage down there and Miss Betty is outside?"

"Quite right, your ludship," said Watkins, rising and commencing to dust himself off. "It runs out into the big rocks on the beach. The Professor, 'e says, sir, it's a great discovery, it's a regular, sure-enough old Roman sewer. Miss Betty, she said it was nothing of the kind, it was a gift from 'Eaven."

"Well," I said, thrusting myself into the conversation, "this is no time for a debate. If you are going to get us out, Watty, you have got to move quickly. Toutou and his friends will be back any moment. One girl can't keep them away. I suspect they'd have been here by now, if she hadn't precipitated some kind of a row."

"Very good, sir, Mister Jack," answered Watkins, calmly producing a knife from his belt. "Such a necessity was duly foreseen, if I may say so."

He went to work methodically on my lashings.

"I trust you will take notice, your ludship, that all possible 'aste 'as been made. It was fair mucky below there, as you will see, gentlemen, and I barked my shins

something cruel. Yes, sir, Mister Jack, I'm going as fast as I can without sticking you. What a terrible place! And Mister Nikka 'as the stomach ache."

"He has worse than that, Watty," said Hugh grimly. "Are the others all right?"

"Yes, your ludship. Ah, Mister Jack, sir, there you are. One moment, sir, until I 'ave 'is ludship loose, and I'll give you a bit of a rub." He sawed away at Hugh's ropes, while I slapped my cold legs with hands I could scarcely move. "Why, your ludship, when we came outside we talked things over, and first off Professor King 'e says that 'e's going in. But I pointed out to 'im 'ow somebody should stay with the young lady, and as 'e was 'er father and I was valet to your ludship, it was plain that 'e should stick by the launch, whilst I—"

"Never mind any more," Hugh cut him off, as he disposed of the last wrappings. "We can talk things over later. Help us to get our circulation back. Rub, man, rub! That's it."

Presently we were able to walk stiffly. Our first concern was to lower Nikka into the drain. He was so weak that he took very little interest in the rescue. His initial flare of understanding was succeeded by a semi-stupor, and his tortured shoulder must have been agonizing, although he never complained. We had Watkins go down ahead of him, and Hugh and I, between us, eased him gently through the hole, and Watkins caught him around the waist and steadied him. My instinct was to follow them immediately, but Hugh checked me.

"See here," he said, "now that we've got this secret entrance, why do we need to let the enemy know of it?"

"How do you mean?" I asked stupidly.

"Can't we cover up our tracks?" he pursued. "Here, Watty," he called into the drain, "hand up that crowbar."

Watkins extended it, a look of alarm on his face.

"I do 'ope, your ludship, you won't run into another mess," he remonstrated. "Best come along right away,

sir, before Tootoo and 'is friends twig what we've done. Really, your ludship—and I'll need some one to 'elp me with Mister Nikka."

"You get started," returned Hugh. "We'll be all right, but we have a job to do first. Get on. We'll catch up with you."

Watkins retired, grumbling.

"If you'll permit me," I said uneasily, "I'm inclined to think you are mad. Personally, I don't hanker for Tootoo's attentions. We may lose this opportunity if—"

"We won't lose this opportunity," answered Hugh, "and I hope we won't lose the more valuable opportunity I'm looking for in the future. Help me break down the door."

Then I appreciated his plan. We worked the crowbar under the sill and between the jamb and the lintel, and with very little difficulty forced the door from its hinges. It was old, and although heavy, had warped and was poorly hung. As it came free, we caught it, and let it down gently on the floor. I crept out into the corridor and around a turn where a flight of stairs began. Nobody was in sight, but I heard a distant murmur of conversation. To the left of the stairs a passage trended at right angles, with a slight upward grade, and I followed it until I came to a clumsy door of planks. I listened at its crack, but heard nothing, so I applied my crowbar and forced the rickety lock. Beyond this door stretched a vast cellar which underlay the structure of the House of the Married.

I waited only to make sure that it was unoccupied, and then returned to the dungeon. Hugh had pushed the stone grating into position on the edge of the opening, leaving a space barely wide enough for us to slip through. We dropped down, and found that when we stood on the empty packing-box which Watty had fetched—for no special reason, as he afterwards admitted, except that he "thought he might want to reach up like"—with him we could

exert the necessary strength, with the help of the crowbar, to pry the grating into its bed.

We crept away after Nikka and Watkins, feeling light-hearted for the first time in twenty-four hours. Ahead of us Watkins' electric torch shone palely on the slimy, moss-grown walls. We splashed in water over our ankles. Big black rats scuttled around us. But we were at liberty, and we licked our puffy lips with our swollen tongues at the thought of the dismay that our enemies would feel when they reëntered the dungeon.

CHAPTER XXII

HILMI'S FRIEND

NIKKA fainted as we reached the mouth of the drain, which was fortunate for him, as it saved him the agony of the slippery climb over the rocks of the beach and the ruined jetty to the *Curlew*. At its exit the drain or sewer was blocked by a heap of stones about four feet high across which it was difficult for men unhindered to pass in silence, let alone men carrying an inert body. But we achieved it finally, and stumbled as best we could on to the precarious footing of the jetty, The *Curlew* was simply a black shadow nestling against the rocks.

As we approached, two figures jumped from the deck, and the slighter of them ran towards us.

"Hugh!" came the whispered call. "Hugh, are you there? Are you safe? Who are you carrying, Jack? Is it—"

I came first, holding Nikka's feet. Hugh and Watkins, supporting his shoulders, were indistinguishable in the rear. It struck me as mildly humorous that Betty's first anxiety should be so ingenuously revealed.

"Hugh's all right," I answered cautiously. "Nikka's hurt, though. Keep quiet, you idiot."

"Thank God!" she said inconsequentially, and sat down on the rocks and commenced to cry softly.

Hugh exploded in a sentimental curse.

"Here, Watty," he growled, "you'll have to manage by yourself."

"Very good, your ludship," muttered Watkins.

I felt Nikka's body sag, and looked back. Watkins was

plodding determinedly after me, panting so loudly under his burden as to lead me to cast a wary eye at the lightless bulk of Tokalji's house. Hugh and Betty had melted into a single shadow-figure from which came vague murmurs and gasped interjections.

"Damn!" I grunted. "What a hell of a time to pick for making love!"

"Quite right, Mister Jack, sir," panted Watkins.

We were both about done up, for Nikka was heavy and we had to use superhuman care to avoid jouncing or dropping him on the rocks. But luckily Vernon King reached us, and with his aid, we got Nikka into a bunk in the tiny cabin. Leaving King to take care of him, Watkins and I returned to the cockpit. I was fighting mad at Hugh for philandering and at Betty for picking such an occasion for tears. But my rage was not proof against the bubbling joy with which they greeted me as they hopped aboard.

"Meet the new Lady Chesby," whispered Hugh.

"Did you ever hear of such a thing?" said Betty. "Why, I had no more idea when I climbed out on those rocks—"

"No, I suppose not," I jeered. "Well, children, let me tell you you chose a poor time for this. If you want my congratulations you must help us to make a quick get-away."

"He's right," agreed Betty, tearing herself loose from Hugh's arm. "We are crazy. Jack, you loose the bow line. Watkins, are the sweeps ready? Prepare to cast off astern, Hugh."

Hugh and I were recouped with brandy and water and sandwiches, and fifteen minutes later, with the current to help us, we had worked out into the Marmora; and Betty judged it safe to have Watkins turn over the engine and switch on the lights. I am bound to say her first thought then was of Nikka. She put Watkins at the wheel,

with orders to stand west at low speed, and ducked into the cabin with us. The electric bulb shone down on Nikka's white face beaded with sweat. His eyes were still closed. King had cut away his coat and shirt, and was bathing his head with water from the drinking-tank.

"How is he?" asked Betty.

"He has not recovered consciousness yet," answered her father. "To tell the truth, I haven't tried hard to bring him around. I fear his shoulder is dislocated."

Betty stooped over Nikka, and felt gingerly of arm and shoulder.

"Yes," she said, "it's dislocated. I have seen dislocations pulled out in the hospitals during the War. I think I can get his shoulder back if some of you will hold him down. It is bound to hurt him cruelly for the moment."

She spoke with crisp authority; her face was all keen intelligence. And I chuckled at the contrast with the way in which she had come aboard with Hugh.

"We'll help," Hugh told her now. "What do we do?"

She stationed us, Hugh bearing down on his well shoulder, Vernon King and I grasping each a leg. She took a deep breath, caught arm and shoulder in her strong young fingers, tugged, twisted with a wrench—a moan from Nikka, lying half-conscious—and there was an audible snap. Betty stepped back, flushed and trembling.

"There," she said, "it's in place, but I wouldn't do it again to-night for anything."

"Good girl," I said.

"That's praise from Sir Hubert," she acknowledged shyly. "Aren't you ever going to congratulate me, Jack? Oh, Lordy, though, I've completely forgotten to tell Dad."

"But that's quite usual, my dear," said my uncle whimsically.

"Don't be a cynic like Jack, old dear," she rebuked him with a kiss. "You know I really have to tell you

when I'm engaged. It happened very suddenly, and Jack blew me up for letting it interfere with business."

"I'm inclined to agree with him," said King. "I suppose the young man concerned is Hugh."

Betty regarded him admiringly.

"Why, Daddy! That's awfully brilliant of you! However did you guess?"

Her father pinched her ear.

"Occasionally, Elizabeth," he said, "you appear to labor under the misconception that I fail to take any note concerning the ordinary routine happenings of the day. But if you prefer, I will base my apprehension solely on analytical grounds. You leap ashore. You call for Hugh. You run towards him. You delay your reappearance. Immediately afterward you announce your engagement. I must maintain the sequence of causes prior to the effect presents an argument grounded on irreputable logic."

"You win on logical as well as mere human grounds, Vernon," I said. "Bet, I congratulate you, minx though you are. If Nikka—"

And at that moment Nikka opened his eyes, and sat up in the bunk, bumping his head.

"Ouch!" he yelled. "Where am I? What—"

He rubbed his shoulder reminiscently.

"I'm sore all over, but I have a feeling it hurt worse a little while ago. How did I get here? And Hugh and Jack?"

So we recounted to him the full story of our rescue, which, in turn, necessitated chronicling our adventures of the past twenty-four hours for Betty and her father.

"I imagined, of course, that a mishap such as you describe had befallen you," remarked King when we had finished. "When Nikka shouted his warning, Watkins and I held a hasty conference on the roof and decided that your adjuration must have had sufficient urgency behind it to warrant our obedience, however reluctant we might be to abandon you. Upon Watkins' insistence, I preceded

him down the rope. Prior to his own descent, he loosened the grapnel, with an eye to the possibility of twitching it down, so that when he was some eight or ten feet from the ground—my estimate, naturally, is hypothetical, as it was impossible to gain any clear view of his accident—the rope came free above, and he was precipitated into an opening in the rocks which we had not hitherto perceived.

"I may say that we later determined in the daylight that it was practically invisible from the adjacent waters, and the hasty investigation I was able to make on my own behalf leads me to the provisional conclusion that we have stumbled upon a genuine archæological find. The ancient Byzantium, as you doubtless know, was a city vying with our modern capitals in comfort and hygienic convenience, and its drainage system must have been—"

"Yes, yes, Daddy," interrupted Betty, "but you are telling about last night, not the ancient Byzants."

"Byzantines, my dear," corrected her father. "The Byzant was the standard coin of value of the Eastern Empire, indeed, of the known world."

"A thousand pardons, old sweetheart, but still, don't you see, you've left the boys high and dry? Here, you'd better let me carry on."

"Very well," answered King with the docility acquired by any man who spends much time in Betty's company. "Perhaps your narrative gifts will secure a more rapid description of our adventures, Elizabeth."

"It's not my 'narrative gifts,' darling Dad. It's that I can stick to the path. You see, boys, I heard Watkins squawk when he fell. The only reason Toutou and his friends didn't hear him was that they were so busy with you. I left the boat and scrambled over the rocks—nearly scared Dad to death. He thought I was an enemy. Watkins had disappeared into this opening. He had slid over the rock-pile that fills it to within three or four feet of the top, and he bumped his head badly. He thought he was in a cave, and I made Dad get in after him and

look around with a flashlight. So long as the rope and grapnel had come down, there was no way for Toutou's gang to trace us, and I was wondering whether we couldn't make future use of a hiding-place almost in the enemy's camp."

"I say, that *was* clever of you!" said Hugh admiringly.

We all chuckled, but Betty thanked him with a smile.

"Oh, I was a little heroine," she continued. "No movie heroine could have surpassed me. Dad took a look, and announced that it was one of the old sewers, and seemed to run inland beneath Tokalji's house. He wanted to follow it all the way in, but I decided there would be no opportunity for a rescue that night, and I made him and Watkins come back to the *Curlew* with me. We ran the launch to the wharf of a Greek fisherman I know on the Asiatic shore of the Marmora. He agreed to take us up to Constantinople in his boat, and to wait there for us all day to carry us back.

"We discussed the problem going up to Constantinople, and we couldn't think of anything to do for you, short of going in ourselves and setting you free. We didn't know how to get into touch with Nikka's uncle and his Gypsy friends. Manifestly, we didn't want to tell the police or the British authorities—although we would have done that if we had been unable to get to you to-night. Watkins said that 'treasure or no treasure 'e wasn't going to see 'is ludship butchered like 'is uncle, whatever 'is ludship might say any time.' Oh, Watkins was lyrical, Hugh."

"He's done damned good work," assented Hugh gratefully. "Bless his old heart. So you just went up to Constantinople, and lay doggo?"

"Just that. We slept most of the day, and after dinner sneaked away, and boarded the Greek fisherman's ketch. We took the *Curlew* about ten, I think, and steered straight for Tokalji's house. And oh, Hugh, if there hadn't been that opening from your dungeon!" The tears

came into her eyes. "To think what Nikka had to stand! And you others would have had it, too."

"If there hadn't been that there would have been something else," Hugh reassured her. "And now we have a secret way to follow direct into Tokalji's lair."

"But after you get in you will have a pitched battle before you can control the place," Nikka pointed out. "I don't see that you are likely to profit very much by it unless you are willing to put the issue to the proof by cold steel."

There was no gainsaying this argument, and none of us was inclined to advocate wholesale slaughter, not even Nikka, with his aching shoulder and memory of Toutou's brutality. We had hashed over the subject pretty thoroughly by the time the *Curlew* was docked, without discovering a solution of our problem, and from sheer weariness abandoned the discussion by mutual consent. It was too late to find one of the variable Pera taxis, and we walked up through the deserted streets of Galata, tenanted only by homeless refugees. In the hotel lobby we said good-night—it was really good-morning—and went to bed to sleep the clock around.

Twenty-four hours rest made us fit. Nikka's arm and shoulder were still lame, but he had Watkins rub him with liniment that supplied the strained muscles, and declared that he was as game for a fight as any of us. And when Watkins brought us an invitation to breakfast in the Kings' sitting room we were able to muster a degree of optimism, despite the difficulties of the situation.

"It boils down to this," said Hugh over his second cup of coffee. "We know that the Instructions are correct and that we have a desperate crew of criminals to reckon with. Our job is to trick Toutou's crowd."

"But how?" I asked.

"Ah, that's the question!"

"You can't trick them," snapped Nikka. "They are as clever as we."

"Then what can you do?" demanded Betty.

"Exterminate them."

"Your proposal, Nikka, seems somewhat—er—shall I say savage?" objected Vernon King.

"We are fighting savages," retorted Nikka swiftly. "I still feel as I did last night that I don't want to risk any of our lives, treasure or no treasure, beyond what is essential to our safety. But the fact remains there is but one kind of treatment those people will understand. They are clever, remorseless, merciless. You can—"

There was a knock on the door. Watkins answered it. His back stiffened as he peered through the crack.

"A moment, if you please, sir," he said coldly, re-fastened the door and turned to us.

"Mr. 'Ilyer would like a word with your ludship."

Hugh rose, his jaw set.

"I'll talk to *him* outside," he said.

Watkins reopened the door, and bowed him out. We heard his first icy words:

"To what am I indebted for this—"

The door closed behind him, and we looked at each other, startled, uneasy. Nobody said anything. We were all thinking of the conversation going on in the corridor.

The tense silence lasted for perhaps five minutes. Then the door was reopened, and Hugh entered.

"Hilyer wants to talk terms," he announced. "In the circumstances, I didn't feel that we could afford to overlook any chance, and I have arranged that four of us will meet four of his crowd at Hilmi's house at three this afternoon."

"I don't trust the dog," I said immediately. "Why go to Hilmi's house? Why couldn't he talk here?"

"He said the only way he could prove that he has a certain trick up his sleeve would be for us to go there. He also pointed out that we need have no fear of treachery,

as we only needed to leave word behind us where we were going."

"Why parties of four?" asked Nikka.

"Obviously, we couldn't take Betty," answered Hugh, "and one of us ought to stay with her."

"If Toutou is there I shall kill him on sight," warned Nikka.

"I told Hilyer we drew the line at that beast. Besides Hilyer and Hilmi, there will be only Hélène de Cespedes and Serge Vassilievich."

"Humph, I still don't see why we should go out of our way to talk to them," I grumbled.

"Hilyer seemed in a reasonable frame of mind," argued Hugh. "He said his crowd are sick of the whole business, that they as well as we are wasting time, and that we might as well compromise."

"I hope you have no such idea in your head," exclaimed Betty. "You couldn't trust them, in any event."

"No, I haven't—not yet, anyway," returned Hugh. "I told Hilyer we had no reason to be discouraged, but he just grinned. He said it was a stalemate. What I am after is to feel out the enemy's position."

None of us could think up a valid reason for objecting to Hugh's strategy, so it was agreed that he, Vernon King, Nikka and myself should keep the appointment at Hilmi's house. Betty said that she would take Watkins and go for a sail in the *Curlew*, and we all approved her plan because we considered her safest on the water.

After luncheon we escorted Betty and Watkins to the Man-o'-war Dock, saw them off and then walked through Pera to Hilmi's house in the Rue Midhat Pasha. It was a handsome residence in the French style. As we approached it from the corner, a big automobile halted in front of the entrance, and Hilmi, himself, appeared in the doorway, ushering out a stout personage, whose frock-coat, fez and predatory visage proclaimed the Turkish of-

ficial. The man scarcely glanced at us, merely climbed into his machine and drove away. Hilmi, awaiting us on the doorstep, rubbed his hands together, with an oily smirk of satisfaction.

"Your servant, gentlemen," he said, with mock humility. "Did you happen to recognize my guest who departed as you arrived?"

"No," replied Hugh curtly.

Hilmi had a peculiar effect on you. He was a rat. You didn't so much hate him or desire to kill him as you did hanker to kick him or stamp on him.

He saw this, and his smirk became a sour grimace.

"Follow me," he snarled.

We passed through a square hall, carpeted and hung with gorgeous Persian, Bokharan and Chinese rugs, into a salon which was a bizarre combination of rickety French period furniture and priceless, solid Oriental stuff. The rugs, as in the hall, were worth a fortune by themselves. Hilyer, Hélène and Serge Vassilievich were lounging on a couch, smoking cigarettes and talking in low tones. The men rose as we came in, Hilyer with a swagger, the Russian with a frown that presently focussed on my face—it seemed he had never forgotten or forgiven the beating I gave him in the Gunroom at Chesby.

Hélène lay back against a pile of cushions, languorously at ease, beautiful as a tigress, a pleasant smile curving her faultless lips. Other than the smile, she made no move to greet us.

"Sit down, won't you?" said Hilyer, automatically taking charge. "Glad you came. Cigarettes? Cocktail? I assure you quite all right; taste 'em myself, if you like. No? Right O! Did they see your friend, Hilmi?"

"He—" Hilmi pointed a finger at Chesby—"says he did not know him."

"Ah!" Hilyer lighted a fresh cigarette. "Don't take my word for it, you chaps, but that man was Youssouf Mahkoun Pasha, who is popularly known in this part of

the world as 'The Grand Vizier's Jackal.' You probably do not see why you should be interested in him and his presence here to-day. The fact is, however, that his visit to this house was timed so that you should have an opportunity to see him. We particularly desired you to see him, knowing that you—ah—" he smiled agreeably—"might be inclined to doubt the veracity of whatever we said to you.

"To cut a long story short, Mahkouf Pasha is a particular pal of our fellow club-member, Hilmi. I don't mind lettin' you in on it that they've been in several deals together. Now, we owe you a bit on account. Last night, for instance. But I gather that you yourselves aren't able to ride clear on the strength of it."

He paused, and Hugh caught him up.

"You have no right to suppose that," Hugh retorted sharply. "We aren't asking terms. You are."

"I notice you aren't refusing to discuss terms," said Hilyer with a glint in his eye.

Vassilievich jerked a remark which we could not understand from the corner of his mouth, but Hilyer waved it aside.

"Go at the narrow ditch first, Serge. There'll be plenty of time for the water-jump. I'm not tryin' to bluff you and your friends, Chesby. I don't have to. As I told you this morning, I have an ace in my sleeve. Bein' a gambler, that's my habit."

"So I've heard," said Hugh with cutting emphasis.

Hilyer never changed color, only eyed him curiously.

"You do get down on a fellow, don't you?" he commented. "As you know by now, there's but one way to dust me. You tried it once, and I haven't forgotten. I've a convenient memory of my own.

"Well, never mind. The fact is, you are stumped just as much as we are. We are plugging around the course, and neither one of us can jockey a horse clear of the field. It's damn nonsense. Gets nobody anywhere. Sensible

thing to do is to lay cards on the table, and make a deal."

"Put down your hand," said Hugh evenly.

"The treasure is somewhere around Tokalji's house," answered Hilyer promptly. "That's certain. To get to it you've got to get into Tokalji's house. What's more, you've got to be able to stay a while in Tokalji's house. And you can't do it. You haven't got a chance of doing it! But let's suppose a miracle happened, and you found the chance." He dropped his cigarette, and leaned forward, driving his clenched fist into his palm to emphasize every word. "Still, we've got you stopped. How? Hilmi's friend, Mahkouf Pasha. We've made arrangements with him, whereby in the event that we give up hope of any better deal, we denounce you and your treasure to him. He will then convey the information to the Imperial Government, and in return for his public service and for our assistance, he and we will be presented with a stipulated percentage of the treasure, as recovered."

He sat back on the couch, and crossed his knees.

"Those are good cards, providing they are played right," Hugh admitted. "But how is the Imperial Government going to secure the treasure's location from us?"

"If they don't secure the information, nevertheless you won't get the treasure. To be quite plain with you, our plan, in the event of the contingency I have outlined, would be to give you an opportunity to get to the treasure before calling in the Government."

"Yes, that would be the way to do it," said Hugh, nodding impersonally. "What's your proposition?"

"Seventy-five per cent. to us, twenty-five per cent. to you."

Hugh laughed.

"I thought you wanted to talk business," he jeered.

Hélène tossed away her cigarette.

"You're playing it too fine, Montey," she remarked.

"Will you talk on a fifty-fifty basis, Lord Chesby?"

Hugh turned to her.

"I don't know," he said frankly. "I want to think it over. I'll admit that by calling in the Turkish Government, you could stall me—and yourselves. But how can I trust you? What guarantees can you give us?"

"No guarantees we could give you would be binding," she answered with an insolent smile. "What's more, we don't have to give guarantees. We hold the whip-hand. You've no alternative but to trust us. As to thinking it over—" she flung a glance at Hilyer, who nodded—"come back to-morrow. We'll give you that long."

"I'll take as long as I choose," returned Hugh, with a flash of temper—he, like the rest of us, was becoming restive under the realization that they did hold the whip-hand. "And understand me, I mean what I say when I tell you that any compromise between us will be based on what we consider satisfactory guarantees."

Hilyer yawned lazily.

"Don't like it, do you? Doesn't feel comfortable to be spurred. Well, suit yourselves. So far as we are concerned, remember, we'd rather come to terms with you. We stand to get more out of you than from the Turkish Government. But if you try to trick us we won't be beyond denouncing you, even at the cost of losing any share at all."

His teeth clicked and his drawl became a measured threat.

"Incidentally, this is not the only ace we have up our sleeve. Our terms will be stiffer to-morrow than they are to-day, and progressively so from then on."

"That goes," added Hélène de Cespedes, rearing her lithe body erect, all pretense of languor gone. "That's legal tender, Lord Chesby. You people are backing a losing game. The cards are stacked against you. You lose, no matter what you do."

"We'll see about that," said Hugh, rising, a spot of

red on each cheek bone the one sign of the white-hot anger that seethed within him.

“Must you go?” asked Hilyer, his drawl resumed. “Au ’voir, then. Hilmi, will you see ’em out?”

CHAPTER XXIII

OUR BACKS TO THE WALL

HILMI BEY bowed us out, his smirk more tigerish than ever. It seemed to us that he had a perfect right to enjoy our departure. We felt that we had come off distinctly second-best.

"Score for them," remarked Hugh, as we shook the dust of the Rue Midhat Pasha from our shoes. "We're chivvied, dished."

"They won't do it," I objected. "And if they did, it wouldn't get them anywhere."

"You're right," assented Hugh. "But there's the delay. This is expensive, Jack, and we can't hang on forever. If we could wear them out, why—"

"You are both wrong!" exclaimed Nikka energetically. "You must remember that you are in Constantinople. Things don't happen here as they do in Europe."

"Constantinople is in Europe," I objected—and promptly felt like the fool the remark demonstrated me to be.

Nikka favored me with a withering glance of contempt.

"We are not talking in terms of geography, but of human nature," he said. "This is the Orient. You ought to realize that, Jack, after what you have seen with me. And in the Orient, and especially in Turkey, such a graft deal as Hilyer made with Mahkouf Pasha would not excite any interest, much less condemnation. It's the regular thing."

"You forget the Allied High Commissioners," interjected King.

"No, I don't. They can go only just so far. Their position is delicate enough, without imperiling their prestige

by interfering in what would be strictly a question of Turkish internal government. They'd know that a wind-fall such as this treasure would be used simply to further Pan-Islamic intrigue and bolster the coffers of the Nationalist Government at Angora. But for that very reason they wouldn't be able to interfere. I tell you, it would be the height of bad luck for us if the struggle for the treasure took on a political tinge. It would be fatal. We might as well pack up, and go home."

"Guess you're right," assented Hugh thoughtfully. "It looks as though we were pocketed."

"What puzzles me is why they didn't try something like this before," continued Nikka. "I fancy they wanted to be very sure of their man first."

"Surely, they won't have told him!" protested King.

"Who? Mahkouf? Oh, no. They're too wise. No, they've simply explained to him the general proposition and arranged tentative terms. They won't trust him any farther than they have to."

"Is it your idea that we've got to accept their offer?" asked Hugh.

"It's my idea that we've got to use our wits, and act quickly," said Nikka.

"But you can't trust them," I cried. "Hélène as much as told you so. We'd get the stuff out—"

"If it's there," Hugh reminded me.

"—if it's there, then, and they would think nothing of jumping us, either by force or by some damned trick."

"They might even stage a fake hold-up on the part of a Government agency," Nikka added cheerfully.

"In plain language, their proposition is: heads we win, tails you lose," said Hugh.

"Yes, supposing you permit them to take the lead from your hands," agreed Nikka. "However, I am reminded of a memorable address I was once privileged to listen to as a soldier of the Legion. A general named Foch read

us a citation, and then told us how to go on winning more. 'I have noticed,' he said, 'that it is the soldier who attacks who wins battles. The initiative is the price of victory. Never permit your foe to assume the initiative. Attack! Always attack!'"

"True," assented Hugh. "And we've been able to stall their gang so far by taking the initiative."

"But if we can't?" inquired King. "Optimism is all right, but—"

"Optimism is all we've got," interrupted Nikka. "We have our backs to the wall. This is the time to fight, if fighting will get us anywhere."

"If it will!" echoed Hugh.

"That's what we have to decide," said Nikka. "You can't work out a problem like this in the street."

We walked the remainder of the distance to the hotel at a breakneck gait. As we entered the lobby one of the clerks came from the office and accosted Hugh.

"Your messenger would not wait, milord," he said. "Mees King had not returned. Indeed, she has not yet returned."

"My messenger?" repeated Hugh, with a startled look at us.

"Yes, milord. He said he must see her. When I told heem she had gone out he left your letter for her, weeth instructions that I present it so soon as she came in."

Hugh's face creased into grim lines.

"Very well. As long as she has not yet returned, I will take it back."

The clerk went to the mail-desk, and plucked an envelope from Betty's letter-box. Hugh thanked him, and turned it over in his hand. It was addressed in an extraordinarily scrawling hand to "Miss King." In the lower left-hand corner was written: "By messenger."

"But it looks nothing like your handwriting," exclaimed King. "I am at a loss to comprehend how persons so

adroit as our opponents have demonstrated themselves to be could hope to secure success by means of such a shallow trick."

"We'll see," returned Hugh brusquely, slitting the envelope. "I have a notion this is the other ace Hilyer bragged about."

The envelope held a single sheet of paper. On it was written in the same scrawling hand:

"Dear Bet:

"I've broken my arm, which explains this abominable writing. I never could do anything with my left hand. Don't worry, I shall be fit in no time. Can you come with the bearer, or if that is not convenient, with Watkins, to the house in Sokaki Masyeri? It's important. Can't write any more.

"HUGH."

"P. S. The others are all right. The bearer can't wait."

"Can you beat that!" I gasped.

"Exceedingly ingenious," murmured King. "Dear me, how fortunate it was that we returned when we did."

"We mustn't leave anything to chance, though," said Nikka quickly: "You can't tell what other steps they may have taken to trap her. We had better go down to the dock at once."

Hugh glanced at the clock.

"Yes, she'd hardly be back yet," he muttered. "One moment. I'll leave word at the desk that she is not to go out, no matter what message she may receive, until we return."

He rejoined us at the door, and we all entered a taxi which Nikka had impounded. Nobody said anything, but while we were jolting into Galata Hugh produced his automatic, and make sure it contained a full clip. At the dock there was no sign of the *Curlew*, and the late afternoon sunlight failed to reveal her stubby little hull amongst the shipping in the Golden Horn. None of the dock attendants had seen the launch or anything of Betty or

Watkins since we had waved good-by to them before three o'clock.

We waited a while, thinking they might show up, but after six o'clock King became nervous and persuaded us to return to the hotel. There, too, there was no word of them, and we began to worry in earnest. Dusk was coming on rapidly, and it was not like Betty to protract her cruise so late, although she was fully capable of navigating after dark, with the help of Watkins, or, for that matter, without his help.

We taxied to the dock a second time. The *Curlew* was nowhere to be seen.

"Perhaps it would be advisable to hire a boat and search for them in the Marmora," suggested King. "Their engine may have broken down."

"We had better not split our forces," Nikka objected.

"Engine trouble would never bother Betty," Hugh said. "Still, I don't like it."

"We are probably worrying about nothing," I said. "After all, it was a blessing in disguise that she stayed out so late. It insured against her being caught by that note in case we hadn't intercepted it."

"I'm not interested in 'if' and 'had,'" snapped Hugh. "I don't like this delay. Those devils of Toutou's are capable of having an extra trick in reserve."

"I vote we go back to the hotel," proposed Nikka; "maybe I can pick up one of my Gypsies. We could start them out on the trail."

Nikka's suggestion did not make anybody any happier. It indicated that he, like the rest of us, was commencing to take the situation more seriously than he cared to admit openly. But we climbed into the smelly taxi for the fourth time, and were jounced up to Pera. The hotel people regarded us with some amazement when Vernon King again inquired for his daughter. No, she had not returned. Was anything wrong?

King hesitated, looked at us. It was hard to know what

to say. Something might be wrong. And yet the chances were that the only thing wrong was a cranky motor. We didn't want publicity. We couldn't afford to attract unnecessary attention. Our party was sufficiently conspicuous, as it was, and was taken for granted and let alone largely because it included an American millionaire archæologist and an English milord, both of whom, by all the rules of the Orient, were naturally assumed to be harmless lunatics.

"No," he answered at length, "I think not. My daughter has a reliable servant with her. I am simply anxious for her return."

The hotel management were all sympathy. Monsieur need not worry. Let him dine in comfort. The instant Mademoiselle returned or word of her arrived he should be apprised. In the meantime, why concern himself unnecessarily?

"They're right," said Hugh as we grouped in the lobby, canvassing our next step. "We've had a hard day, and we need food. Let's eat. By the way, Nikka, did you see your Gypsies?"

"No, and if anything much had gone wrong, I think—at least, there's a strong probability—they would spot it sooner or later and report to me."

"Obviously, we have done all we can for the present," said Vernon King. "Hugh's suggestion is a good one. Perhaps food and a rest will sharpen our wits."

We went to the Kings' sitting room, where we had breakfasted that morning, and sat down wearily, discouraged, disheartened, more than a little dismayed. But as my uncle had said, food and wine and black coffee brightened our despondency. We were on the point of deciding that the best policy would be to risk dividing forces, sending Hugh and Vernon King on a chartered boat to scour near-by waters, while Nikka and I attempted to investigate Sokaki Masyeri, when Watkins entered unannounced.

He was very pale. His collar was streaked with blood.

There was an ugly bump on the side of his head. He dragged one foot after the other.

"Oh, your ludship," he murmured, and dropped into a chair.

At once he strove to regain his feet, but collapsed again.

"I beg pardon, I'm sure, your ludship—no disrespect intended—fair dead beat I am, sir—my 'ead and all—"

Hugh seized a glass of champagne and carried it to him, holding the glass to his lips.

"Where is—" Hugh's tongue boggled Betty's name.

"They—they've—took 'er, your ludship," answered Watkins faintly.

"How? Where? Is she alive?"

King sprang from his chair, wringing his hands.

"Oh, my God! She is all I have! What has happened? Where is she? Please tell me!"

"Wait a minute," said Nikka quietly. "He's all in. Give him food and some more to drink. That's right, Jack. There's a bottle of whiskey over there. Pour a stiff dram into a cup of coffee, Hugh."

With stimulants to help him, and a cold cloth on his head, Watkins regained control of himself.

"It 'appened so quick I don't rightly know 'ow it was," he said. "We 'ad run out beyond the Princes Islands, and I saw there was little shipping around, your ludship and gentlemen. And then there was a fishing-boat with power bore down on us. Miss Betty and I, we didn't think anything about it until 'e was right on us. Even then we thought they'd only lost control of their rudder like. But when they bumped us and tumbled aboard I knew they wasn't up to no good, your ludship."

"Miss Betty reached for 'er gun, and so did I. But somebody grabbed 'er, and somebody else pushed me over, at the same a chap lashed at me with an iron-weighted club. 'E thought 'e'd knocked my brains out, and 'e would, too, except I fell so fast on account of bein' pushed, I was under the level of the rail when the club 'it me and

most of the blow went into the rail. Splintered it, it did, your ludship. And but for that I wouldn't be 'ere."

"And Miss Betty?" questioned Hugh eagerly.

"I don't know, your ludship. When I saw anything again I was lyin' on the floor of the cockpit, dusk was coming on and the launch was drifted far out to sea. They'd stopped the engine. I don't know 'ow I got back 'ere. My 'ead went round and round. But I thought if I could get to you, your ludship and gentlemen, maybe we could think of something else to do. Just give me a chance to lay my 'ands on that 'ere Tootoo! I'll bash 'is 'ead for 'im."

"They did have a spare trick ready," commented Nikka. "Our visit to Hilmi was part of a plot to get hold of Betty. You see, they would have caught her, whether she had gone sailing or not."

"You said this afternoon we had our back to the wall," said Hugh. "You were right. They've licked us. Our only chance is to clean them up."

The room-telephone rang. King answered it.

"Send him up," he said. And to Nikka: "A Gypsy asking for you."

"That will be Wasso Mikali," cried Nikka. "He must have learned something. I thought he would. Don't be downhearted, Hugh. This hand is a long way from being played out. It is as I thought all along; we have got to meet savagery with savagery. It is a case of kill or be killed."

"But Betty!" exclaimed Vernon King. "Think of her! What will they—"

"I am thinking of her," retorted Nikka. "If we hope to rescue her we must strike hard. Give them time, let them strengthen their position—and she will go to some harem in Anatolia or to a procurer in Salonika. I tell you, I know. We are dealing with men and women who have no mercy, who fight like animals, who are animals.

Well, from now on, Nikka Zaranko will meet them on their own ground."

There was a knock on the door. Wasso Mikali entered, his garish Gypsy dress in striking contrast to the Western furnishings and our own conventional garments.

"I greet you, son of my sister," he said calmly. "My young men, watching in Sokaki Masyeri this evening, beheld Tokalji's party carry in a bundle in a sack, which was a body. I have hastened that you should know it."

Nikka clasped his hand.

"It is well, my uncle. I thank you for the news. This is the night of blood of which I have spoken. We shall all dip our blades before the sun rises to-morrow."

"My heart is glad," replied Wasso Mikali, with flashing eyes. "My young men's knives are eager. Their hands are ready. What is the plan?"

Nikka turned to us.

"I must go with my people," he said. "Hugh, do you and Jack think you could keep the gang in play by a surprise attack through the drain? That would give us a chance to force the street-entrance, and we should have them between two fires."

"And where am I going to be?" demanded Vernon King indignantly.

"This will be a nasty affair, Professor," returned Nikka. "You ought to stay out. We are younger men, and we are used to this kind of thing."

"Betty is my daughter, and I am as able to fight for her as any of you," answered King. "I know how to handle a pistol."

"We ought not to refuse you, you know," said Hugh. "Every man is going to count."

"I certainly expect to be counted," replied King.

"Me, too, your ludship and Mister Nikka, sir," spoke up Watty, lunging to his feet. "Yes, I will, gentlemen. You give me another glass of that 'ere whiskey or arak

or whatever you call it, and I'll fight 'em all by myself. Yes, I will. And I guess I can swing a crowbar, if I 'ave got a bump on my 'ead. Let me at 'em, gentlemen, only let me. That's all I ask."

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE STORM

IT was beginning to rain when we left the hotel, with occasional peals of thunder; but we welcomed the change in the weather as a factor aiding the surprise attack we had intended. At the Galata end of the Lower Bridge, which was deserted as usual after dark, we dismissed our taxi, and held a final brief council of war in a patch of shadows next the bridge abutment. King, Hugh, Watkins and I were to embark on the *Curlew*, while Nikka and Wasso Mikali tramped to the Khan of the Georgians and rallied Mikali's six young men. Then they were to go to Sokaki Masyeri, and wait for a pistol-shot, which would be the signal that we had passed through the drain and were at grips with the enemy. Hugh and Nikka compared watches and agreed that we should be in Tokalji's house not later than half-past ten.

The rain let up as we shook hands and wished each other luck, but by the time the *Curlew* was chugging down the Golden Horn it had set in again with tripled violence, lashed on by a northeast gale. At intervals broad splotches of lightning bathed the city to our right in a ghastly greenish glow. And when we emerged into the Bosphorus we found a fairly high sea running, but the launch sturdily thrust her bow into the waves and rode buoyantly over them. We cautiously felt our way along, lights out, motor running at half-speed, taking bearings whenever the jagged lightning streaks illuminated the waters.

I was worried by the frequency of the lightning displays, but fortunately, as we sighted the round tower

on the walls, which was our first landmark for Tokalji's house, there was a lull in the storm. We were also favored in having the old sea-walls act as a lee for us as we worked in closer to shore. The waves moderated, and the fish-hook curve of the ruined jetty broke their remaining force. When Watkins had made fast bow and stern lines to a couple of masses of battered masonry the *Curlew* floated almost as easily as at her moorings by the Man-o-war Dock. But the difficulties of navigation in the darkness and the necessity for extreme care had slowed our progress, and we were some minutes behind our schedule.

The rocks of the jetty, too, were awash, and it was as much as your life was worth to slip, for a fall might mean a broken head or limb. At one point, indeed, several of us lost the jetty altogether and were obliged to swim half-a-dozen strokes to the beach. Watkins, who insisted on arming himself with a crowbar, would have drowned if Hugh had not hauled him in by the scuff of the neck. It was impossible to see anything, except once when a lightning flash streaked the sky and struck with a stunning report in Scutari across the Straits. And then we were so afraid of being discovered that we froze stiff as close to the rocks as possible.

The beach, like the jetty, was under water. The waves lapped up to the foot of the walls, and we stumbled desperately over submerged rocks and boulders. Watkins, just ahead of me in line, tripped, and very nearly knocked my brains out with his infernal crowbar. I begged him to drop it, but he doggedly refused.

"I'm no knife-fighter, Mister Jack, sir," he said, "and I'm intending to give the persons that 'it me a taste of their own stew like."

We identified the opening of the sewer by the hollow, booming sound with which, every now and then, an unusually high wave would roll over its lip. It sounded like the beating of a watery bass-drum. The rain was

driving down again, and the wind blew overhead with a shrill vehemence that was deafening.

"We'll never be able to get through that 'ell-'ole to-night, Mister Jack, sir," screamed Watkins in my ear. "We'll be drowned along with the rats."

I was somewhat of Watty's opinion, myself, but managed to placate him. Hugh, without any hesitation, yelled: "One at a time!" and slipped into the sewer mouth between two waves. King followed him, and Watty and I brought up the rear. We were cheered to find the place less terrifying than we had imagined it. The water was thigh-deep, instead of knee-deep, as it had been when we escaped from the dungeon; but once you had fumbled your way by torch-light over the jagged moraine that blocked the first thirty feet, the footing became safer and the water shallowed.

Just the same, I never think of the place without shuddering. It was deathly silent, except for the ceaseless seepage of moisture, the occasional muffled boom of a wave spattering over its mouth and the squeaking of the gigantic black rats that swam ahead of us or wriggled into cracks in the serried courses of the masonry. Our electric torches shone feebly on the mossy walls, with their sickening fungus growths, their bright green, pendent weeds. Amorphous plants hung from the roof. The atmosphere was slimy, noisome, unclean. And always there was the "drip-drip-drip" of water.

We breathed more comfortably when our torches revealed overhead the bars of the stone grating in the floor of the dungeon.

"All quiet above," whispered Hugh, after listening intently. "Dark as hell, too. I say, how much farther do you suppose this drain goes?"

He trained his torch into the thick murk of the immense tube which extended beyond the grating as far as our eyes could penetrate.

"I'm inclined to believe it continues into the city, prob-

ably as far as the site of the Forum of Theodosius," King replied, his scholar's interest awake. "That was a region of palaces which would have required such a work of engineering. It should be well worth exploring."

"Never mind that now," urged Hugh. "We have another task on hand."

He pried up the grating with Watty's crowbar, the butt of which we rested on the ledge in which the grating fitted. This secured a space sufficiently wide for us to squeeze through, and after all of us had climbed up we eased the grating back into its bed, so that there was no trace remaining of our entrance.

The dungeon was the same barren cube of dusty stone that we had left by virtue of Watkins's aid. The ropes that had bound us were still on the floor where we had cast them. The door we had broken leaned against the wall. Obviously, Tokalji and his people had never even suspected how we had escaped, apparently, did not even know of the existence of the sewer.¹

It is strange, and I fancy the only answer is Nikka's: that the modern non-Christian inhabitants of Constantinople look with superstitious fear upon the vast underground structures—baths, cisterns, conduits and sewers—left by the ancient Roumis, as the builders are usually called, do not want to see them or hear of them, never enter it if by chance one is discovered, and cover them up whenever they can.

It was five minutes to eleven when we gained the dungeon, and we knew that Nikka must be at a loss to account for our failure to signal him. He might suppose us to be casualties of the storm, and in desperation, attack alone

¹ Tokalji expressed great surprise when we told him about the sewer. He refused to enter it, and seemed to regard it as a danger to his house. Nikka thought that he would try to fill it in, but I believe Kara, who feared nothing, pointed out to him its usefulness for illicit purposes, and he changed his mind.

on his own account. So we wasted no time, beyond shaking the water from our clothes.

The lower passage and cellars were deserted, but as we climbed the stairs leading to the central hall opening on the little atrium between the Garden of the Cedars and the large chamber which Tokalji occupied we heard a distant murmur of voices in disagreement. Investigation proved the hall to be unoccupied, and we were presently grouped on its uneven floor, with only a curtain separating us from the drama going on in the atrium. The rain was drumming down overhead; the wind howled with undiminished force; and at intervals the thunder boomed like a barrage of 155s.

"No, you are wrong, Toutou, it is everybody's business," said Hilyer in French.

"You may be chief, but you have no right to risk common property," protested Sandra's resonant voice.

Toutou snarled something in his guttural, indistinct, animal speech.

"—like her, and that's enough," it concluded. "I'm tired of the rest of you. Bunglers, every one."

"Have it your own way," said Serge, "but it's not business. She's worth so much to us."

"One might suppose you a green youth," cut in Maude Hilyer's frigid tones. "Why should you endanger our coup for a colorless chit like—"

"I say there is no risk," snapped Toutou. "What do I care for them? What does it matter what they—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Hilyer, "but you Continentals don't appreciate the Anglo-Saxons' feeling about their women. You—"

"Have done," bellowed Toutou with a sudden flame of temper. "Urrr-rr-rrhhh! Am I not the master? I want her, and I shall have her! Go! Go! I say, or you shall behold Toutou's knife."

They evidently went, for we could hear the shuffling of feet, with an undercurrent of muttered curses and objur-

gations. Hugh started forward, pistol in hand, but I checked him. This was no time for unpremeditated action. There was a moment of silence—and a woman's cry of hatred.

"Leave me alone, you beast! If you touch me, I'll bite you! You can't bind my teeth. Ah—"

It was Betty's voice, and Hugh shook me off and was at the curtain with his hand on the folds before I could reach him. But reach him I did, and another interruption helped me to restrain him. King, his face white and his hands shaking, joined us. Watkins lurked behind us.

"Let me—" gasped Hugh.

"There's plenty of time, you fool," I hissed. "Wait! Somebody—"

I was going to say that somebody might come back, and the somebody cut my sentence in the middle. A door opened, and the voice of *Hélène de Cespedes* spoke.

"What is this I hear, *mon ami*?" she asked. "Are you mad? This girl is the spoil of the band. She belongs to all of us. We are holding her for a bigger stake. Shall we let you have her for your own satisfaction? You take too—"

"You are jealous," snarled Toutou. "I say I want her, and I am going to have her. I am tired of women like you."

Hugh, his nerves under control, gently parted the folds of the curtain with his pistol-muzzle. The atrium was brilliantly lighted. He and I could see perfectly. On a divan heaped with cushions lay Betty. Her hands were bound behind her, and her feet were tied loosely. Her hair was rumpled, and her blouse ripped off at the shoulder. But her eyes sparked fire as she stared fearlessly at the monster who stood beside her.

Toutou was in a different mood from any I knew, or, rather, I should say, from the one I knew. His sinisterly beautiful face revealed the latent ferocity that was the salient feature of his character, but with it there was

something else, something difficult to define. The tigerish glare in his eyes was replaced by a softer light; the pupils were expanded. His mouth was slack. His movements were uncertain. He hovered over Betty, looking almost fearfully at Hélène.

She stood just inside the door that communicated with the large outer chamber. She was dressed in a sport suit and high boots. Her hat was off, and her face showed pinched and wan. There were shadows under her eyes.

"Say I am jealous," she answered steadily. "I have a right to be. You have never had a woman who did more for you than I. Do you think Miss Innocence here would do what I have done?"

"That is why I want her," returned Toutou, his voice singularly hoarse. "I am tired of you. I am tired of all of you. I hunger for innocence. I wish to forget crime and evil. When we finish this job I am going to take this petite and go away where Toutou will be unknown."

"Toutou LaFitte a reformed character!" Hélène laughed sarcastically. "You don't know what you are talking about. You have nothing in common with innocence."

"Who knows?"

"I know, mon ami. The girl would kill herself first. Sooner than see you do this, I will kill you."

Toutou frowned at her.

"Stand back!" he warned. "If you touch her—"

Hélène stepped forward boldly, one hand inside her jacket.

"There are many things you can do, Toutou," she said. "And you are chief. Nobody questions that. But remember that if the others are afraid of you, I am not. And I say that you shall not do this. Something you owe to the band. More, still, you owe to me. You know me well enough to appreciate that I intend to secure what I consider due me."

Toutou growled in his throat, and his pupils began to contract. The slack look left his mouth.

"It is time you feared me," he snarled. "Go away, I am through with you. I never wish to see you again. You shall have your share of this coup, then you shall leave the band."

"But I thought there was to be no more band," sneered Hélène. "I thought Toutou was to become an honest bourgeois, with a dove-cot—"

"You shall feel my knife," he barked at her.

"Why should I fear your knife?" she retorted. "The last time a woman threatened you, you fled from her knife."

Her face was white with rage, and Toutou's whole frame seemed to draw together as an animal does when it prepares to spring. His long arms curved before him, his right hand at the level of his belt.

"You do not know when a man tires of you, it seems," he exclaimed. "Can you not see we wish to be by ourselves?"

She made a violent effort to regain her self-control.

"For the last time," she said quietly, "will you heed the opinion of your colleagues and leave this girl alone?"

"No," he growled savagely. "Go, you—"

"Look out," cried Betty, who alone of us all could see clearly what Toutou was doing with his right hand. "His knife!"

Hélène snatched a pistol from her blouse; but he was too quick for her. As the flame spurted from the barrel he leaped aside, and his immensely long arm curled out and slashed down. The blood frothed over the hilt of his knife as it clicked on her collar-bone, and she dropped, choking, to the floor.

In the same instant Hugh fired, but one of us jostled him and the bullet missed. Toutou turned, saw the curtain swaying as we charged, and ran for the door. I fired once, and the bullet chipped between his arm and side, but he was out before we could shoot again.

From the courtyard came a crash and a ripple of shots

that vied with the thunder. A chorus of yells pierced thinly the howling of the gale.

Nikka, hearing Hélène's pistol, had accepted it as the long over-due signal for his attack.

"Take care of Betty, Professor!" Hugh called to King. "See if you can help this poor girl. Come on, Jack, Watty!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE RECKONING

THE big room was a maze of shadows. Stable-lanterns, flickering in the drafts, hung from hooks in walls and pillars. Toutou stayed his flight by the door to the courtyard, one ear inclined to the bedlam of shots and outcries that threaded the roar of the storm. As we burst in he raised a pistol and sprayed us with bullets as rapidly as he could pull the trigger. But he had the knife-fighter's inability to shoot straight. Bullets "phutted" all around us, yet none of us was hit.

Several men and women stared at us. Hilmi Bey peered from behind a pillar next the courtyard door. He had plainly taken shelter at the crack of Hélène's pistol. Montey Hilyer and Serge Vassilievich stood some distance to the right of us, paralyzed with surprise. Maude Hilyer and Sandra Vassilievna had risen from seats in the apse-like recess at the other end. Apparently they had supposed Toutou was engaged only with Hélène.

He screamed at them, insensate in his fury. His knife still dripped blood. He flung his empty pistol at us.

"Fools!" he shrieked. "We are betrayed!"

The door to the courtyard was jerked open, and he spun on his heel and dodged behind a pillar. Tokalji reeled in.

"Strange Tzigane folk have burst the street-door," he bellowed. "We—"

He gaped at sight of us.

"Quick!" Hugh shouted. "Scatter—before they shoot!"

Watkins and I jumped right and left. Hugh sought the shelter of a pillar.

“Shoot!” yelled Toutou. “Shoot! Fools! Swine! Dogs!”

And he babbled on obscenely, darting catlike from pillar to pillar toward Watty. Hilyer and Serge simultaneously came to life and made for us, guns spurting, throwing pieces of furniture to confuse us. Things happened so fast that it was impossible to keep track of everything, but I found myself involved in a pistol duel with Serge. Hugh and Watkins were blazing away at Hilmi, Hilyer and Tokalji, and Toutou was weaving through the smoke, seeking an opportunity to close with one of us. I paid no attention to the women until a bullet spat on a pillar by my ear. I knew it could not have come from the front, and startled, I turned to the left in time to see Sandra aiming deliberately at me. I dodged, and thereby opened myself to her brother's attack.

He was an excellent marksman, and I realized there could be only one result for me if I continued exposed in flank. So I tore a lantern from its hook and flung it on the floor. The burning oil vomited forth a cloud of thick black smoke, and under cover of this, I changed my position, gaining the protection of another pillar. Here I was safe from Sandra; but her brother knew where I was and our duel continued. It was no steady stream of bullets, but a pot-shot whenever one of us thought he saw an opportunity. All around us others were doing the same thing, and the vaulted roof rang to the reports, while the acrid fumes of the powder and the smoke from broken lamps stung the eyes. And outside the thunder was pealing and the lightning splitting the heavens and Nikka's men and Tokalji's Gypsies were trying their feeble best to rival nature's forces.

Suddenly, I sensed that our opponents were bracing for a combined effort. There was a rapid-fire exchange of exclamations in the thieves' French and Tzigane dialect they used for confidential communication. I heard an empty cartridge-clip jingle on the floor. But in the shift-

ing light and smoke it was impossible now to tell real men from the shadows. I stuck my head around a pillar, crouched and slipped aside. Then, while I was unprotected, the rush came.

"Go!" called Hilyer's voice.

The shadows were pricked with pistol-flashes. Serge Vassilievich leaped for the pillar behind which I had stood, his gun blazing, knife in hand. He did not see me, on my knees, four feet to the right, and I put my first bullet in his thigh. He stopped as if a giant's hand had been shoved against his breast, tottered and fell backward. As he fell, one of the burning oil-pools ignited a bundle of blankets, and the rising flames sketched us both clearly against the darkness that shrouded the far end of the room.

There was a scream. I recognized Sandra's voice, but I could not see her. Instead, I saw Hilmi Bey sneaking on Watkins, who was holding back Toutou. I drove the Levantine away with my first shot. Then the hammer clicked, and I knew the magazine was empty. I dropped to my knee again, thinking I was concealed by a patch of shadow, and fumbled for a fresh clip. But the treacherous light flared upward, the shadow disappeared and I was left defenseless. I saw a raging figure, hair flying, pistol raised, running at me. I saw the pistol flash, felt a numbing blow on my left shoulder and tumbled in a heap.

For a second my eyes misted, the room danced before me. Then I heard a chatter of Russian and Watkins, mildly disapproving.

"None of that 'ere, miss. *If* you please, now! I don't want to 'urt you, but—"

I looked up. Sandra, her face contorted with demoniac rage, her empty pistol shaking in her hand, was backing away before Watty's menacing crowbar.

A woman screamed again, horribly, so that it rasped your heart-strings. It was Maude Hilyer. She stood, with

hands clutching her cheeks, her gaze fixed on the center of the room where Montey staggered against a pillar, the blood from a punctured lung gurgling in his throat, bravely trying for the last time to raise the smoking muzzle of his automatic.

Hugh, relieved of the Englishman's attack, was taking pot-shots at Toutou and Hilmi. I saw Tokalji slip through the door into the rain, and as Vernon King ran up the stairs from the atrium Hilmi followed the Tzigane and Toutou jumped through a window, squawling like the big cat he was. Behind me Watkins was scientifically roping Sandra, hand and foot, regardless of the curses she spat in three languages. Vassilievich had fainted from the pain of his wound. Maude Hilyer sat on the dirty floor, under the single wobbling lantern that remained intact, and cradled the head of her dying husband. We had swept the House of the Married.

Or had we? As I tried unsuccessfully with one hand to reload my pistol, I felt a pressure on my back. I turned and very nearly impaled myself on a long knife-blade. A tense, willowy figure, bare-footed and tumble-haired, stood over me.

"You are Jakka," said Kara in the Tzigane dialect—I could understand simple phrases after my experience with Nikka's tribespeople. "Where is Nikka?"

Dumbfounded, I pointed to the courtyard. She glided toward the door, but Hugh intervened.

"Not so fast," he said. "Whose friend are you?"

She did not understand him, and raised her knife.

"I'll shoot you, if you are a girl," warned Hugh. "Any one who resists—"

"She's all right, Hugh," I called. "She's trying to find Nikka—must have been asleep upstairs. Let her go."

But she did not wait for him to stand aside. With a single leap, she put one of the pillars between him and herself, and vaulted from the window Toutou had escaped by.

"Nothing slow about that girl," said Hugh. "Everybody whole?"

A pistol cracked in the doorway, and the bullet sang by his ear.

"They're still after us," he commented, dropping beside me. "Have to load my gun."

"Then load mine, too," I said. "My left shoulder's hit—whole arm is no use."

He laid down his automatic.

"We'll carry you inside with Betty. I see Watty has made a prisoner, and Vassilievich had better be watched. You can—"

"I will not," I returned. "We'll need every man before we finish to-night. Hear that!"

The courtyard had become an inferno—yells, screams, howls, shots, the beat of the rain and the din of the storm.

"Tie my arm to my side, and I'll be O. K.," I urged. Betty crawled between us.

"Did I hear you call me?" she asked.

"My word!" grunted Hugh. "Get back, Bet. This is—"

"Touch and go," she supplemented his sentence. "I have Hélène's gun. You boys had better help Nikka. I can guard this place."

A whistle shrilled in the courtyard.

"Hugh!" It was Nikka's voice. "Jack!"

There was a racket of shots.

"Yes, he must be badly outnumbered," muttered Hugh. "No time to lose. Here, Jack, where's your handkerchief? Right O! Thanks, Bet. Not too tight. Can you stand that?"

"Yes, load my gun, somebody."

Betty took it. King, esconced behind an adjacent pillar, fired at the door.

"They seem to be waiting for us out there," he observed.

"Yes," said Hugh. "Betty, you lie here in the shadows. Don't let anybody approach you, no matter what they

say. Keep an eye on Mrs. Hilyer and the Russian girl—and her brother. See him over there? He's done in, for the time-being, but if he comes to maybe you'd better tie him up."

"Don't you worry about me," answered Betty valiantly. "I can take care of myself. Do hurry!"

"'Ere, your ludship," came a throaty whisper from Watkins. "This way, gentlemen."

He was at the far end of the room, and while we watched, he put his hat on the end of his crowbar—from which he refused to be parted—and stuck it above the sill of a window.

"I've done this twice now, your ludship," he added, "and nothing's 'appened. They ain't watching 'ere."

A little investigation proved that he was right, and we crawled out into the rain and huddled against the house-wall, attempting to disentangle the situation. The rain was descending in slanting, blinding sheets. Pistols cracked and men gasped or shouted, but we could not tell whether they were friends or foes. As we waited, two men dashed by, one in pursuit of the other. It was impossible for us to intervene. Then, with a preliminary crash of thunder, the lightning zigzagged across the sky, and for the winking of an eye the courtyard was bright as day.

I had an impression of bodies scattered here and there, and little clusters of men that struggled and ran. Over in the corner of the courtyard wall by the bachelors' house men swirled in a tumultuous mass. The darkness closed down once more, thick and wet and cold.

"Coming, Nikka!" shouted Hugh. And to us: "The big fight is the key to everything. We must break it up. They've got Nikka pinned in."

Tokalji's gang faced around as we attacked their rear; but we went clean through them and almost drove on to the knives of Nikka's party.

"After them!" panted Hugh. "We've got 'em breaking!"

Nikka called to his men in their own tongue, and they lined up with us in a thin file across the courtyard from wall to wall. Behind Nikka I had a brief vision of a figure as elusive as the rain. I thought of an assassin who had flanked us and lifted my automatic—but something, the proud poise of the head, perhaps, warned me it was Kara.

There was a crackle of pistol-fire in front of us, and a knot of figures swayed into view, distorted, indistinct. The deluge seemed to act as a freak lens to play tricks with normal vision; and possibly that was why comparatively few were shot. Twice I had men fair over the barrel of my pistol, and both times I missed—and I am rather better than a good shot. But I had no opportunity for philosophizing at that time.

Toutou and Hilmi Bey went for Nikka. He was bleeding from a cut in the arm, and all his men were engaged. Hugh, with King and Watty, was developing an encircling movement on the opposite end of the line. I started to go to Nikka's aid, but a man sprang at me from nowhere, and I was obliged to dodge him until I had a chance to shoot. I did not miss that time. When I looked again, Nikka and Toutou were circling each other, and Hilmi was at grips with Kara.

At first I thought the Levantine was scheming to throw the girl, but as I drew near I perceived that he had clinched with her in mortal terror of her knife. She held his own powerless by her grasp of his wrist. A mocking light gleamed in her eyes, and she shook back her loose hair and jeered at him in the Tzigane dialect. With one pudgy hand he strove to ward off her blade, but he could not control her lithe muscles. She tore her wrist free, the steel drove home through his sodden frock-coat and he collapsed with a squeal.

Kara pulled out her knife as casually as though it had

been a familiar occurrence, and turned to watch Nikka's fight with Toutou. Nikka from the corner of his eye saw the two of us, plainly waiting a chance to help him, and he leaped clear of the circle of his enemy's knife long enough to snap:

"Let be! I finish this alone!"

I couldn't have helped him, in any case, for as redoubtable a person as Tokalji, himself, attacked me that moment. Kara did not even notice my danger. She also ignored the man she called father. Her whole attention was concentrated upon Nikka. I fired once at the Gypsy chief, and missed. That was the last cartridge in the magazine, and I attempted to lose him in the rain. But he refused to be lost, and I was making up my mind to taking his knife in my wounded arm and battering his head with my pistol-butt, when Watkins loomed in the mist and brought down his trusty crowbar on Tokalji's knife-wrist. The Gypsy yelped like a dog, and the knife clattered on the ground. Watty produced some rope from a pocket and deftly twisted the man's arms behind him. Tokalji yelped again.

"Easy," I said. "The fellow's wrist is broken."

"I'm tying 'im above the helbows, Mister Jack, sir," answered Watty. "But if it did 'urt 'im a bit I wouldn't worry, sir. I 'ave an hidea, sir, 'e was one of the scoundrels that bashed me 'ead."

My one thought was of Nikka, and I sought him over the rain-battered area of the court. The fighting had drifted away toward the sea-wall. There seemed to be nobody near me. I listened hard, and in a lull of the storm my ears detected the click of blades. I stumbled toward it, and nearly fell on top of Kara, crouching as I had left her, eyes glued on the two men who circled tirelessly, steel-tipped arms crooked before them.

Toutou had a huge advantage in reach, but Nikka had the benefit of lithe agility, a wrist of iron—the result of years of bowing; a hawk's eyes; and all the tricks with the blade that the people of his race have amassed in

centuries of bloody strife. Four times, while I watched, Toutou endeavored to force down Nikka's knife by the sheer strength of his gorilla-arm, and each time Nikka disengaged and refused to give the opportunity his adversary needed. Twice Nikka tried a certain trick, a combination of lightning thrusts and clever footwork. But the Frenchman parried it each time, and retaliated so quickly as to drive Nikka out of reach.

Neither of them said anything. Toutou spat and whined in his throat, cat-fashion. Nikka panted from the exertion. Both of them dripped with sweat, notwithstanding the rain. There was something of an epic quality about their struggle, and I discovered myself taking the same almost impersonal interest in it that Kara demonstrated. By all the principles of normal right-behavior, I should have ignored Nikka's command to let him fight it out alone, and rushed in at the first opening to kill a monster, who did not deserve and had no appreciation of knightly treatment. But I could not. I was chained by an emotion I could not fathom.

And yet I was absorbed in Nikka's success. My heart leaped in my throat when I saw that he was trying for the third time the trick which had twice failed. His knife went up in the same way, he shifted posture as he had in his other tries, and Toutou mechanically side-stepped as experience had told him was safe and aimed a stab which should have cut Nikka's throat. But Nikka was not there. He had varied the trick. Stooping, his knife had fallen, then sliced upward—and Toutou staggered, a look of bland surprise on his face, ripped open from belly to chest.

"Pt-sss-ss-tss-sst!" he hissed, and fell forward.

Kara hurled herself into Nikka's arms.

"You are the greatest knife-fighter of the Tziganes!" she cried triumphantly. "You are a king! You are my man! See, while you conquered your enemy, I, too, stabbed the rat who tried to put his knife in your back."

And she led Nikka to the body of Hilmi, which, I regret

to say, she kicked with her brown toes. Nikka absent-mindedly leaned over to wipe his knife on the Levantine's coat-tails, but Kara intervened.

"No, no," she exclaimed. "Here is my hair! Wipe it on my hair, beloved of my heart. Let me suck it clean with my lips! So we shall have strong sons."

Nikka looked sufficiently annoyed to show that he had some instincts of civilization remaining.

"Peace," he ordered royally. "Be quiet, girl!"

She cowered before him, and he recognized me.

"Oh, hullo, Jack! Where's Hugh?"

Hugh loomed through the rain as he spoke.

"That you, Nikka? We think we've got Tokalji's people rounded up, but we need you to talk to them. Has Tou-tou—"

"He's there."

Nikka pointed his knife to the heap of drab garments that had been the French "killer."

"Good for you!" exclaimed Hugh. "I'm glad he didn't get off. When you think of Uncle James and—that girl we saw—and I suppose others! What a beast!"

We splashed after him, Kara following Nikka like a dog. Wasso Mikali, his surviving young men, King and Watkins were guarding thirteen shivering Gypsies in the lee of the bachelors' quarters. In reply to questions, Tokalji told Nikka—and Kara, shamelessly throwing in her lot with us, corroborated him—that there had been fifteen of their band on the premises. A search of the courtyard disclosed two of them dead, together with one of Wasso Mikali's men. We bound the arms of the prisoners, most of whom were suffering from bullet-wounds or stabs, and marched them over to the House of the Married.

The one lantern was still flickering when we entered, and Betty rose to greet us.

"Thank God!" she said soberly as her eyes envisaged us all. "What did you do with Mrs. Hilyer?"

"Isn't she here?" asked Hugh.

"No. I don't know just when she left. There was a lot of firing, and I looked to where she had been sitting by her husband, and she was gone."

Nikka and I sped back into the courtyard. We picked our way over the occasional bodies to the street-door. It was ajar.

"I locked it myself!" cried Nikka. "Old Wasso picked it without damaging the spring. I took time when we entered to fasten it again."

I was feeling very weak. My shoulder throbbed. Nausea assailed me in recurrent waves. But I clutched the gate-post, and peered into the street. Nobody was in sight. Sokaki Masyeri was a bare waste of mud and foaming gutters.

"She escaped," said Nikka. "Too bad! We might have—What's the matter, Jack?"

He caught me as my knees bent under me. I felt the rain on my eyelids, and then everything was blotted out.

CHAPTER XXVI

UNDER THE RED STONE

WHEN I opened my eyes Watkins was bending over me.

"Ah, there, Mister Jack," he said, "'ave a drink of this. Thank you, sir." And as I struggled to a sitting position: "No need of 'aste, sir. All's well. And you 'ad a bit of a knock, if I may say so, sir."

"It seems as though you and I were the Jonahs, Watty," I answered. "This is the third time I've passed out cold."

"Quite right, sir. The same thought was in me own 'ead. If Mrs. Prouty and 'Awkins—the butler, sir—and the others in the Servants' 'All could 'ave seen me last night, they would 'ave been startled, sir. I do assure you they would. There was that Russian young lady, now. I give you my word, sir, she cursed like a maniac, and 'er brother was no better when 'e came from 'is faint. A fair rowdy lot of people we 'ad on our 'ands—including the young person in whom Mister Nikka happens to be interested, as the saying goes, sir."

"You said 'last night,' I believe," I interrupted.

"Yes, sir. It's close to noon, Mister Jack. But Lord bless you, sir, there's been no rest. We 'ad a largish hundertaker's job, let alone tidying up and minding the prisoners."

"What have we done with the bodies?"

"In the garden, sir. The prisoners did the work—except the Russian persons, sir. 'E couldn't, account of 'is leg, and she, being a lady, so to speak, was hexcused."

"Well, I'm going to get up," I announced. "My shoulder feels better."

"If you wish, sir. Miss Betty thought you would be fit after a nap. She and Mister Nikka's uncle, the tall old gentleman who looks like Pantaloon in the Drury Lane pantos, they looked you over. They said your shoulder bone was bruised and the muscle torn, sir; but they've wrapped you up to the king's taste. My instructions were to get you anything you required, but with submission, sir, might I suggest you sleep a little longer? There's nothing—oh, 'ere's Mister Nikka."

Nikka strolled in from the courtyard—I was lying in the apse at the end of the large chamber on the ground floor of the House of the Married—with Kara trailing him.

"Hullo, Jack!" he greeted me. "Tough luck you had to stop a bullet. We're all more or less cut up, but you had the worst of it, although my uncle, who is a practical surgeon in a crude way, claims the bullet missed the bone."

"So Watkins told me. Any news? The police—"

"No, the storm covered the shooting. Hugh has been to Pera with Betty in the *Curlew* this morning, and they heard no comments. One of Wasso Mikali's men stopped in at the corner coffee-shop, and made sure there was no local gossip. The only danger, I think, is from Mrs. Hil-
yer. We've got to risk that."

"Aren't you all worn out?"

"No. Too much excitement, I expect. We're just going to eat. Then Betty insists on going after the treasure again."

Kara sidled up to him, with a venomous glance at me, and ejaculated a remark sotto voice. Nikka laughed, and pushed her behind him. She heeded him like a dog that is contented with a rebuke, so long as notice is taken by its master.

"She said," Nikka translated, "that I ought not to talk with you any longer. She wants me to pay attention to her."

"Humph!" I growled, returning Kara's look with in-

terest. "Help me up, will you? Thanks! What are you going to do with her?"

"Tame her, I expect," he answered cheerfully. "I've begun by taking her knife away from her. She wanted to stick Betty because I talked more than five minutes to Bet about you."

"A sweet job! She'll end by sticking you."

"Perhaps," agreed Nikka equably. "Come and get some breakfast. A cup of coffee will help you to take a more charitable view of a wild little Gypsy girl."

Hugh, Betty and Vernon King welcomed us as we entered the atrium, where a low table of packing-boxes had been rigged. Wasso Mikali and his men were either guarding the prisoners or else keeping watch on the street entrance. Kara scowled at all of us, but squatted determinedly behind Nikka. Watkins proceeded to serve, and I was amused to observe that Kara, much against her will, was secretly awed by the matter-of-fact pomp with which Watkins was able to invest a meal under such impromptu conditions.

We talked very little. The one idea in the mind of each of us was to get at the red stone, which we could see from where we sat, and we choked down our food as rapidly as possible. I forgot completely my injured shoulder. Watkins actually hurried himself in passing the eggs. Betty and Hugh crumbled a few bits of toast, and strangled over their coffee. Vernon King alone ate placidly, with the zest of a man who feels he has done a good job well. At last, Betty could stand it no longer, and she sprang up with an imitation of Kara's scowl so faithful that everybody, except Kara, laughed.

"Daddy, you've had time for two breakfasts," she decreed. "That's enough. Besides, I won't have you getting fat in your old age. Come! Everybody! We've got our chance, our chance that we began to think was gone aglimmering. The treasure of the Bucoleon is at our feet—under our feet, I mean. Up with the red stone!"

"Up she goes!" assented Hugh.

Crowbars, chisels, mallets, picks and shovels appeared, and Hugh paced the distance from the Fountain of the Lion. His calculations indicated the stone that I had roughly estimated on our first visit to the garden. We all watched him with madly beating hearts. It was really true! We were going to lay bare the secret covered by the red stone, to grasp the prize that the Emperor Andronicus had concealed seven centuries before, the prize that generation after generation of men had striven for in vain.

The thought exhilarated us, and when Hugh stepped aside and seized a chisel and mallet we all set to with superhuman energy. I was unable to do much, but I experienced a sharp pleasure in the mere act of holding with my one hand the head of a chisel upon which one of the others rained blows with a mallet. We could not take time for conversation. We worked. Even Vernon King, who had millions at his command, succumbed to the lure of the red stone's secret, and panted as he chipped the rotten mortar from the interstices between the red stone and those surrounding it.

Working at such a pace and with so many willing hands, it was only a matter of a few minutes before the stone was detached from its neighbors, and Nikka thrust the tip of a crowbar under its edge. Followed then a struggle of some duration, but in the end it sagged up and was overturned. Below it was a second stone of equal dimensions, granite, unmortared, although the dust of ages had sifted into the cracks around it. This yielded to our efforts much sooner than had the cap-stone, and Hugh, kneeling amongst the débris, peered down into a yawning hole in the pavement.

"Careful!" warned King. "A compartment which has been sealed for centuries will be full of carbonic-acid gas."

Hugh sniffed.

"It's as damp as—as—that beastly drain," he said. "But it smells reasonably sweet."

We poked our torches into the hole. All they showed was a steep flight of stairs descending straight into blackness.

"Most extraordinary!" mumbled Vernon King. "Byzantine masonry, beyond a doubt. Observe the squaring of the blocks, and the composition of the mortar. This is no such slovenly work as Turkish masons do. The master-builders of old laid these stones."

"If it's safe, what are we waiting for?" I barked.

Our nerves were on edge.

"Oh, take your time," said Hugh impatiently, and he lowered himself, feet first.

The others followed him, one by one, and I brought up the rear, ashamed of myself for the temper I had exhibited. The pitch of the stairs was so sharp that we had to bend only a little in passing under the rim of the opening. They were barely wide enough for one man, and I counted thirty of them before they terminated in a passage that led off at right angles, with an appreciable downward slope.

"Hold up!" Hugh called back to us a moment later. "Here's an opening into another passage. There's a step down. Why, this is the drain again!"

We joined him, incredulous, only to be convinced at once that he was right. The passage debouched on the sewer some distance inland from the grating of the dungeon.

"My God!" groaned Hugh. "And we've gone through everything for this! Was there ever such a sell!"

The vaulted roof echoed his words. The "drip-drip" of slime and fungi was a melancholy punctuation for them. But the reaction loosened our taut nerves. The one thought of all of us was to comfort Hugh.

"There may be some explanation," said Nikka.

"Perhaps we overlooked something," I volunteered.

"It is a most unusual archæological discovery," offered King.

"There is an explanation," cried Betty. "We *have* overlooked something. I know it. There must be."

"It's no go," answered Hugh despondently. "I've brought you on a wild-geese chase."

We all looked rather white and wan in the cold light of the electric torches.

"It's not your fault, old man," I said after a moment's silence, trying dismally to be cheerful. "The lead looked good. We followed it because we hoped it would make you rich. We failed, and that's that."

Betty stared wildly from one to the other of us.

"You all make me tired," she exclaimed. "Why should we give up hope? How long have we looked, so far? What—Oh, let me by! I must think!"

She brushed by me into the fake passage, and the echo of her footfalls reached us as she ascended to the garden.

"We might as well follow her," said Hugh. "I'm awfully sorry, you chaps. You risked your lives for this rotten show. My poor deluded ancestor! I expect most of these buried treasure stories are bunk, anyway. In fact, I have a dim recollection of telling poor Uncle James as much. And there's another thing to make the gods laugh! A fine old cock like Uncle James devoting his whole life to following a will-o'-the-wisp—and then losing it for nothing. It—it's—oh, Hell, I suppose it's really funny!"

We climbed wearily up the thirty steps to the garden level. As I reached the surface the first object my eyes encountered was Betty, sitting on the red stone and poring over a sheet of paper.

"Hullo!" she called, looking up with all her accustomed vivacity. "Do you recognize this paper, Hugh?"

She fluttered it at him.

"Looks like my handwriting," he admitted.

"It's the copy of the Instructions you sent me, which

I remailed to myself Poste Restante. I remembered it this morning when we were in Pera and called for it at the Post Office while you were packing the bags at the hotel. I thought we might need it."

"What good can it do?" asked Hugh heavily.

"There's an important point in it, which nobody has appreciated up to this time. It becomes doubly important in view of what we have just seen."

"The elided portion!" exclaimed Nikka.

"Exactly! Look!"

And she spread the paper before us. Hugh had faithfully copied his uncle's translation of the old Latin, setting down also the several lines of dots by which Lord Chesby had indicated the words which had been smudged out by moisture and handling at some past time. They appeared, you will recall, at the conclusion of the explicit directions:

"Underfoot is a red stone an ell square. Raise the—"

And then nothing distinguishable until the concluding line of farewell.

"Well?" demanded Betty triumphantly as we all studied the cryptic dots.

Hugh shook his head.

"Betty, you were a brick to remember it," he said, "but honestly, what use is it? Whatever words are missing are unimportant. They must have been or somebody would have rewritten them."

"That does not necessarily follow," spoke up Vernon King. "Old documents, especially those inscribed on parchment, are tricky records. It frequently happens that some isolated portion will be spoiled, while the other parts of the same sheet may retain their integrity. Moreover, we should not lose sight of the possibility that the person who last concealed the parchment, the Lady Jane Chesby of whom you have spoken, seems not to have been inclined to attach much importance to it. She would have been the last one to attempt to make good its deficiencies."

"But where could the treasure be that we have not looked?" demanded Hugh. "The directions are explicit. We followed them faithfully. So far as they exist we have verified their accuracy. But we have uncovered no place which could have served as a treasure chamber."

"Yes, Hugh, the directions are explicit," retorted Betty. "And as you say, so far as we have them they have proved correct. They left us in the passage under the red stone which ends at the drain. And why was that passage built? Why to get into the drain!"

"And the treasure was in the drain?" protested Hugh. "That's absurd, Bet."

"It would have been washed away long ago," I scoffed. "That place is full of water at very high tides."

"I didn't say it was heaped on the floor and left there," returned Betty.

"Where would it be?" asked Nikka.

"That's what we have to find out."

"What about the grating in the floor of the dungeon?" I cut in. "If they wanted to get into the drain—"

"But no man who had hidden a treasure in the drain would have relied on a drainage grating in a dungeon for means of access to it," answered Betty.

"That dungeon was a place for getting rid of special prisoners," interrupted King. "When the drain was actively in use, the water must often have backed up into the dungeon. I agree with Elizabeth that an Emperor hiding a vast treasure would not have utilized the grating for access to it."

Nikka closed the argument.

"I am on Betty's side in this," he said. "At the least, she has given us something definite to work on. Now, if you will take my advice, Hugh, you and Professor King, with Betty and Jack to help you, will be the treasure-hunting squad. I had best remain here to act as expeditionary liaison officer with Wasso Mikali and his people

at need. And if you don't mind, I'll need Watkins as galloper."

Every one agreed to this plan, and the four of us immediately descended into the passage again. King made a careful study of the stonework, in which I assisted him, with a view to ascertaining beyond any doubt whether there was any sealed opening in its walls. Both of us considered this the logical first step, but Hugh and Betty wearied of so unexciting a task and left us to explore the upper end of the drain.

We had been at this for rather more than an hour, without the faintest hint of success, when we were interrupted by a hail from Hugh.

"Professor! Jack! Come here!"

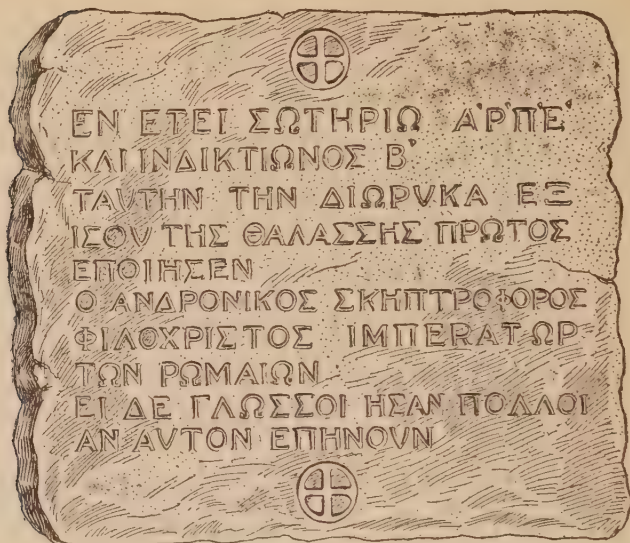
"Oh, Dad," called Betty, "here's a funny inscription on the wall."

We dropped into the water, and waded inland for some twenty-odd paces to where they were standing, with their torches bearing on a patch of marble let into the rough face of the right-hand wall. Hugh was working with his knife-point, scraping away the moss and fungi that partially obscured the letters.

"I saw it by accident," bubbled Betty. "We went up a long way to where the roof gets much lower, and we heard water rushing ahead of us, so Hugh said we ought to turn back. My light just happened to catch on this piece of stone here as we passed it. There was one row of letters quite clear, but the others were all overgrown with this slimy stuff. What does it say, Dad?"

"It's Greek right enough," added Hugh, still scraping industriously. "I can make out a word here and there, but it doesn't seem to be the same language I boned at school. Just a moment, sir, and I'll have the whole inscription cleared."

I peered over their shoulders at the deeply-carven lines of angular characters.



The stone was about three or four feet square, and below it was another similar one. Above the lettering was an elaborately scrolled cross. From it my eyes sought my uncle's face, and were held at once by the astonishment I saw mirrored there.

"Most amazing!" he muttered to himself.

"What is it, Dad?" clamored Betty.

"But it can't be," he said, shaking his head. "Quite extraordinary! Dear me, I never saw this formula before."

"For Pat's sake, tell us!" I implored.

"It says nothing about the treasure, my dear boys," he answered sadly. "My surprise was called forth by the unusual form of expression. These inscriptions always follow a certain set phraseology, but this one is strikingly different."

"By gum," groaned Betty inelegantly. "Isn't this the limit?"

"Read it anyway," I urged.

Hugh was beyond words.

"It says," began King, "and mind you, I am translating roughly—your statement that it differs from the classical Greek, standardized according to German theories, Hugh, such as is taught in the classroom, is quite correct—'In the year after Christ 1185 and of the Indiction 2, Andronicus, the Scepter Wielder, Christ-loving Emperor of the Romans, built this drain new from the tide level.'"

He broke off.

"So far it is no different from thousands of other inscriptions we might find on the city walls, aqueducts, cisterns, churches or other public works. But now comes the part I cannot understand: 'If there were tongues, many might praise him.'"

"'If there were tongues many might praise him,'" repeated Betty.

"What does it matter?" said Hugh dispiritedly. "We're not interested in whether or not the subjects of the Emperor Andronicus were anxious to praise him. I could curse him for putting up a cock-and-bull story on my foolish ancestor."

"'If there were tongues many might praise him,'" repeated Betty again. "And it was the Emperor Andronicus! The same, Daddy? The one the Instructions speak about?"

"Manifestly, my dear, the date certifies to that."

"Then there must be something in it," she insisted.

"'If there were tongues many might praise him.' Don't you see what it means? There were no tongues to praise him. This work was not known at the time. Why? And why was he able to keep it a secret?"

"He may have murdered all the workmen," replied her father slowly. "He was a singularly bloody tyrant, according to the contemporary historians."

"Exactly," triumphed Betty. "And why would he have murdered them, in order to keep this work a secret?"

You see, he 'built the drain new from the tide-level,' probably to this point. That means there was a drain, but it needed repair, and he seized the opportunity to hide his treasure. Hugh, where are those tools? I'm going to get this stone out of the wall."

It was as hard a job as we tackled, despite the softening of the mortar by the moisture of the ages; but after two hours, Hugh and Vernon King were able to pry the slab loose and it fell out with a mighty splash. Hugh thrust in the end of his crowbar, and it struck brickwork. Our torches showed this to be very flimsy, and when it was pounded it rang hollow. The three of us who had two arms apiece went at it with a will, and I was dispatched for reinforcements.

Nikka refused to come himself, but he sent Watty, and the valet helped in the final act of demolition. By the end of the afternoon we had smashed through an embrasure nearly three feet high and four feet long, and Hugh nominated Betty for the honor of leading the way into the dim passage which abutted on the hole. The rest of us crawled in afterward. My uncle and Watkins boosted me up, for my bad shoulder hindered me.

The passage was seven feet high and four feet wide. It led straight back between brick walls into a large chamber the roof of which was upheld by brick piers. The place was musty, foetid even, and very damp, but as our torches struggled through the darkness the rays were captured and juggled by glinting, sheeny heaps that were stacked against the piers and walls. Betty started forward involuntarily. There was a slurring sound, and then a tiny tinkling that died away in a faint murmurous sssh.

"It's gold!" she cried.

We flashed our torches right and left. It was true. Great golden piles sloped away from us. The fragments of the bags that once had held this wealth projected from the multitude of coins. At the end of the chamber the

piles mounted to the roof. There were stray rivulets of gold that trickled almost to the mouth of the passage. To the left stood several tiers of ancient chests. The first yielded at once to the point of Hugh's knife. The rotten wood cut like cardboard. When he flung the lid back it fell apart, but we scarcely noticed it for the dazzling glamor of the gems that seemed almost to fight to escape from their centuries-long imprisonment.

Jewels and jewelry and massive plate were heaped in indiscriminate confusion, huge salvers, cups, chalices, amphoræ, bracelets, armlets, amulets, brooches, necklaces, rings beyond number—and running in and out of the set stones, the endless profusion of unmounted gems, diamonds, amethysts, rubies, opals, pearls, sapphires, topazes, garnets, turquoises, emeralds, and others I could not name.

I picked up what had been a king's crown, a barbaric headdress of crude unalloyed gold, red and soft, set with enormous uncut stones. Next to it was a chased bracelet that might have come from the goldsmiths' shops of Athens in the classic age. The quantity of precious things was almost inconceivable. And this was but one of a score of chests.

King stooped and scooped up a handful of gold pieces from the floor, broad, finely-minted, bearing the double-headed eagle of Byzantium and the busts and figures of dead- and-gone Emperors.

"Was there ever such a find?" he muttered. "What a chance for the numismatists! See! Here is a Byzant of Artavasdos the Usurper. I never saw one before. It was not known that he had coined money. And here is the likeness of Arcadius, first of the Eastern Emperors."

Betty threw her arms around Hugh, as shameless, for the moment, as Kara.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she murmured. "It's as much as you thought it would be, isn't it?"

Hugh was dazed.

"As much? By Jove, sweetheart, I—I never dreamed

of anything like this! I—really, you know, I didn't honestly believe in it before. I used to pretend to make myself carry on. I told myself it was up to me to see the thing through on Uncle James's account. But—this! I say, Professor, how much do you suppose there is here?"

Vernon King swept his torch in an arc around the chamber, the extreme confines of which were shrouded in shadow.

"I am no fiscal expert, my dear boy. It would take a committee of jewelers to assess those chests alone. As for the gold, I have seen the Treasury vaults in Washington, and gold mounts up fast when you run into the thousands of pounds avoirdupois. Just as a wild guess, I might hazard a minimum of \$100,000,000, £20,000,000 at normal exchange."

"But it can't be!" I protested, the sweat beading my forehead at the thought. "Why, it's ridiculous. They didn't have wealth on such a scale in those days."

"Not at all, Jack," returned my uncle, his scholar's pride aroused. "You must remember that you are viewing here the hoard accumulated by a Roman Emperor, one of the last rulers before the definite initiation of the Empire's final collapse. It was then still by far the richest country of which we have any record. According to Benjamin of Tudela, the Jewish traveler of the Twelfth Century, the revenue received by the Emperor from the city of Constantinople by itself amounted to 7,300,000 numismata, or in the neighborhood of \$20,000,000.

"Benjamin and other later authorities, Andreades, Paparrhegopulos, Kalligas, assert the revenue derived from the remainder of the Empire to have represented five times this sum. At the most moderate computation, the total revenue of the Empire must have exceeded \$120,000,000. It was probably very much more. In addition, the wealth of the individual citizens and nobles was enormous. The Emperor Andronicus, with whose efforts we have to deal here, had two years to milk the country's

wealth. During those two years, he not only absorbed the taxes, but confiscated the wealth of more nobles than any ruler prior to that period.

"I should not be greatly surprised if the contents of this chamber was discovered to exceed \$125,000,000. Andronicus was possessed with a mania for accumulating a treasure for rebuilding the Empire. If he—"

"If you aren't very lucky, Hugh, you are going to lose all this stuff just because you were lucky enough to find it," said Nikka's voice behind us.

We turned to confront him. Kara's dark, passionate face was at his shoulder. Her eyes drank in the picture, and she stood on her tip-toes to whisper in Nikka's ear.

"No thank you, my dear," he answered drily. "She suggests that I give her my knife, and that between us we clean up you people. Oddly enough, she is not alone in possessing that idea. Who do you suppose is upstairs?"

"Mrs. Hilyer," I exclaimed.

"Right. But she's not alone. She came back with Mahkoul Pasha. I've got them both safe under lock-and-key, with Wasso Mikali's knife at their throats. Still—"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Out of the frying-pan into the fire, your ludship," remarked Watkins glumly. "Sure I was this was too good to last."

CHAPTER XXVII

ANTIQUES, STATUARY, CHGS. PD., WITH CARE

RELUCTANTLY and with many a backward look, we retired from that glimmering vault of wealth, and climbed to the atrium. We were all soaked to the waist and suddenly conscious of the fatigue of the last two crowded days. Personally, I felt that I had reached the limit. I didn't care what happened. I thought that we were in a hopeless fix. Vernon King was equally morose. Betty was ready to weep. Nikka was sardonically amused at our ill-luck. Kara was indifferent, so long as Nikka refused to embark upon a scheme of wholesale murder in order to impound the treasure for themselves alone. Watty was tiredly hopeless. Only Hugh squared his jaw and said nothing.

"I'll have the precious pair fetched in if you like," volunteered Nikka as we sat about the room. "But I don't see the use. I've talked to them, and I can assure you they aren't in a mood to be agreeable. Mrs. Hilyer is consumed with revenge. She isn't thinking of anything else. She just wants to get back at us. Mahkouf is politely threatening. He figures that he has us on the hip because of the killings last night,—murder of His Imperial Majesty's subjects and all that. He talked about international complications, and lawlessness."

"Could we, perhaps, detain them sufficiently long to permit us to get away?" inquired my uncle.

"With the treasure? Hardly! I say, do you realize the sheer physical job in removing that stuff? Why, there must be tons of it! It would have to be boxed and crated. And where would you take it to? How would you take it anywhere? To arrange for its removal would require—

oh, I'd hate to say how long! In the meantime, we might hold Mrs. Hilyer without causing any comment, but Mahkouf is a well-known person. He isn't called 'The Grand Vizier's Jackal' for nothing."

Wasso Mikali appeared in the doorway at the foot of the stairs that led up to the large chamber on the courtyard level. His face was grim and the tone in which he addressed Nikka so savage as to attract the attention of all of us. Kara eyed him with approval, and ventured a confirmatory nod.

"He says," Nikka translated, "that the only thing for us to do is to kill Tokalji and the rest of the prisoners, stow their bodies in the drain that I have told him about, and then deny to Mahkouf that there ever was a fight or that there is any treasure here. He insists it was a great mistake for us to take any prisoners, but that we can yet remedy it in time."

"He's dead wrong," said Hugh abruptly. "I think I can use Tokalji to work out of this mess."

"How?" asked Nikka.

"By making it worth his while. He'd do anything for money, wouldn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, we have the money in limitless quantities. I want to say a word to you lads and Professor King that has been on my chest ever since I saw that treasure-vault. I never thought of this before, because I didn't take the story any too seriously, as I've already said. But now it's beyond cavil. My point is this: there's too much wealth down there for any one man. Professor King says there may be \$125,000,000. Nobody needs that much just to lead his own life in affluence.

"I'm going to divide it equally between you, Nikka, Jack, Professor King, Watty and myself, subject to whatever disbursements Nikka thinks Wasso Mikali should have and a price necessary to attach Tokalji's allegiance to us."

"Your idea of purchasing Tokalji's aid, supposing he can aid us, is a good one," said my uncle. "But I have more money now than I can use. I must absolutely refuse your offer so far as it concerns myself, Hugh."

"Me, too, your ludship," spoke up Watkins. "What would I do with millions of pounds? All the other servants would be jealous of me, and the newspaper gentlemen would be 'aving their fun with me every day most like. No, no, sir. I'm an old man, and with all due respect, I'm sure I'd much rather stay on with you at Chesby, your ludship, and valet you properly. It ain't so easy to find a good valet nowadays, sir. Really, sir, I'd rather not."

"Well," said Hugh, "we won't fight about that, Watty. If you stay with me you—Why, hang it all, you're one of the best friends I've got! You must stay. But I'm going to insist on splitting with Jack and Nikka. Then Jack can build houses to suit himself, and Nikka can play his fiddle to poor boys and girls."

"I knew you'd make an offer like that, Hugh," said Nikka simply. "It's like you. And don't you worry about Wasso Mikali. I'll take care of him and his tribe with my share. It wouldn't do them 'any good to make them grossly rich. They'd leave their old ways of life, contract tuberculosis or dissipate themselves to death. Let them be. They live an idyllic life, a life good enough for me, anyway."

"But I'm not going to protest against the corruption of Tokalji, if you believe you can make anything out of it. What is your idea?"

"Have him in," answered Hugh. "I'll show you."

Wasso Mikali brought in the brigand chief, his broken arm in a sling, a sour glint of hatred in his eye.

"Now," said Hugh, "ask him, Nikka, if he'd like to be so rich he wouldn't need to steal again, except to indulge his sportin' tastes?"

Tokalji evidently considered he was being spoofed, and he drew himself haughtily erect.

"He says any man would answer that one way," replied Nikka. "But that you seek to annoy him."

"Tell him," returned Hugh, "that I'll give him £100,000 Turkish if he'll come over to our side, and back us up against Mahkoun Pasha. Explain to him about Mahkoun Pasha."

The change in Tokalji's manner was ridiculous.

"He says," translated Nikka, "that he will kill the Sultan for you for £100,000 Turkish. But he wants to see the money."

"Watty," said Hugh, "go down into the sewer-treasury and collect a sack of jewels—anything will do. Tell Tokalji I'm sending for an earnest of our good-faith, Nikka."

Avarice glowed in the brigand's face. Wasso Mikali looked disgusted. He nursed some secret grudge of his own against Tokalji, and had wanted to cut his throat from the minute he discovered the scoundrel was our prisoner. But Hugh's hunch was a good one. None could doubt that as Tokalji gradually thawed under the influence of his stimulated acquisitive instincts.

And when Watty tramped in fifteen minutes afterward and plumped a bulging sack into the old thief's lap a miracle was wrought. Sweat beaded on his forehead; his hands clawed the lovely stones; his eyes shone; he cackled to himself and crooned like a mother over her baby.

"Tell him they are his, and that we will add gold to them, if he plays fair with us," continued Hugh when he judged he had made his effect. "But he will have to remain our prisoner until we leave."

"He awaits your orders," Nikka translated the reply, as Tokalji regretfully tore his attention from the treasure on his knees. "Wait a minute." This last as Tokalji burst into a tumult of excited speech. "He says for you not to worry about Mahkoun Pasha. He knows all about

the Pasha. He, the Pasha, has been smuggling arms from Roumania to Kemal Pasha at Angora, and Tokalji has played a part in the business."

Hugh just grinned, and the rest of us grinned back at him.

"We are indeed fortunate," remarked King.

"Fortunate your eye!" returned Hugh with jubilant disrespect. "I knew such precious scoundrels would sell each other out. Now, Nikka, you tell Tokalji he is to inform Mahkouf Pasha that he regards us as his friends, inasmuch as we relieved him last night from the oppression of a band of thieves. And we'll have Mahkouf in here, and give him an earful. I suppose we'll have to drag in that poor Hilyer woman, too. I hate that. But she'll have to be made to understand her position."

The interview that followed was absurd and sordid. Mahkouf Pasha, after an attempt at hectoring defiance, collapsed completely and begged to be let alone. Nikka, who handled him, squelched him to putty, and told Wasso Mikali to see him to the street.

"And remember," Nikka concluded, "if you dare to breathe a word against us, you Levantine dog, we will show you up for what you are to the Allied High Commissioners, to your master the Grand Vizier and to the Nationalists at Angora. You have played all three of these, one against the others, and all three will be glad to hang you. Go, before I kick you!"

Wasso Mikali positively chuckled as he jerked the ashen-faced mongrel to his feet and steered him up the stairs.

Maude Hilyer was not so easy. She began by a wailing tirade that degenerated into a filthy harangue. I learned afterwards that she had risen in life from a position which had made her engagement for the Gayety Theater chorus an epochal event for her. We sent Betty from the room, and Hugh gently quieted her.

"See here, Mrs. Hilyer," he said. "We don't enjoy this any more than you do. For what happened to your hus-

band—Perhaps anything I say will be in bad taste. But the fact remains that we had nothing against him. It was he who went after us. And I notice that although that demon Lafitte tortured and attempted to abuse several of us, including a woman, you never raised your hand to restrain him.

“But I’m not appealing to you on grounds of decency, but of self-interest. If nothing comes out about Hilyer’s end, you can go home and hold up your head. On the other hand, if you want to air what happened, I shall see to it that the whole story of my uncle’s death becomes known. Do you think that then you will be received anywhere at home? I leave it to you.”

The queer social vanity that was the main-spring of the woman’s life responded to this argument. She dried her tears and restrained her tongue; and for a moment I felt sorry for her. But she showed her character at the last, even as she rose to go.

“It’s all very well what you say, Lord Chesby,” she whimpered. “But what am I going to do now? Hilyer’s dead, Little Depping is loaded with mortgages. His cousin George will inherit what’s left of it, anyway. And I—”

She hesitated artistically.

“I am not going to pay you blackmail,” returned Hugh coldly, “but you may call on my solicitors this day two months. What we do for you will depend upon your conduct.”

And that was the last any of us saw of Maude Hilyer. But I may as well say here that she did call on Mr. Bellowes in London, and that by Hugh’s direction he arranged to pay her a small income conditioned on good behavior. Hugh, with his usual generosity, insisted, too, upon making substantial presents—booby-prizes, he called them—to our two Russian prisoners. They were not released, however, until we left Constantinople, as their vindictive attitude assured us of their desire to wreck our fortunes, if they could discover an opportunity. What

happened to the strange pair after Wasso Mikali freed them I do not know. But I should hazard a guess that while Mrs. Hilyer will be content to live respectably in a cheap Brighton hotel, eking out her means with the practice of bridge of an uncommonly sharp variety, Serge Vassilievich and Sandra Vassilievna—whether brother and sister, in truth, I never found out—will fleece their way through the smart watering-places and resorts of the Continent so long as the police permit them at large.

“Are we downhearted?” demanded Hugh, as the door closed behind Mrs. Hilyer.

“We are not,” returned King. “It is amazing to reflect upon the apparent hopelessness of our position a couple of hours ago, while now we seem to have no reason to anticipate any insurmountable difficulties.”

“Don’t be too sure about that,” I remonstrated. “We still have to consider the proposition of smuggling tons of treasure out of a country that would be delighted to get its hands on it.”

“We’ll find a way,” Nikka declared. “I feel more hopeful than I did. Hugh has given us a lesson in practical strategy. It was a master-stroke to buy in Tokalji. Now we have some time to spare.”

“And with submission, sir, Mister Nikka,” said Watkins, gently closing the door behind him. “Miss Betty is dead asleep on some rugs upstairs. ’Ave you gentlemen forgot it’s past eight o’clock? Come, now, a bite of supper, and you’d best sleep a while.”

“He’s right,” assented Hugh. “We’re overdoing it. A night’s sleep will set us all up.”

We slept royally, leaving the guard duty to Wasso Mikali’s men; and the next day we awoke with confidence in our united ability to overcome all remaining obstacles. At Nikka’s suggestion we called upon Wasso Mikali for his advice. He pondered for five minutes or so, then spoke like a judge on the bench.

“A great treasure like this cannot be trusted in many

men's hands," he said. "Otherwise I would offer to transport it by mule-trains to the dwelling-place of my tribe. Jakka knows how secure that is. But even if we succeeded in carrying it there, what should we do with it? To make use of it, you must carry it to the lands where you live.

"So, friends of my sister's son, I say that you must put the treasure on a boat, and you must go on that boat, yourselves, and you must be sure you can trust the captain."

"But how can we find such a boat and captain?" asked Hugh.

"Leave that to me," answered Wasso Mikali promptly. "I know certain men of my race in this city who can furnish me with information about the vessels that come to the Golden Horn. And in the meantime, you must make boxes to hold the treasure."

We heard no more from him for a week. He went and came, sometimes by day and sometimes by night; and we in the house in Sokaki Masyeri, prisoners as well as captors, labored with saw and hatchet, hammer and nails. As fast as we shaped the boxes, we carried them down to the drain and packed them, wrapping gold and gems in whatever fabrics we could find around the house, and in this way we used up all the loose lumber, cloth and bedding in Tokalji's store rooms.

Then, one night as we sat in the atrium, very sore as to hands and fingers from the unaccustomed carpentry, there was a knock on the courtyard door, and Wasso Mikali ushered in a tall, lean man in a blue sea-officer's cap. He left this man in the courtyard, and came down to us.

"I have brought you a sea-captain who does not fear to dodge the law," said the old Gypsy without preface. "He loves a Circassian girl who lives in a street near the Khan of the Georgians, and I have made it plain to him that if we do business with him the girl stays in my custody for surety of his honesty. He is a Russian, and his ship is his own—or so he says."

"You did not tell him what we wanted him for?" questioned Hugh.

"Tell him only what you must," counseled Wasso Mikali. "I think I have a hold on this man, but I would not trust him more than I could help."

"Why can't we tell him that we have made a remarkable find of ancient statuary, mosaics and that sort of thing?" I suggested. "He will look us up, and the story will sound credible for King. We'll let him know that the Government wouldn't like to see such a valuable collection go to foreigners, and so we have to smuggle it."

"That will do," Nikka approved. "And that will explain why we must send the boxes aboard secretly."

We made the deal with the Russian captain that night. He was not a bad chap, but a bit put to it to earn the keep of himself, his crew and his vessel by reason of the anomalous situation in which they found themselves, the *Slava* still running under the old Imperial registry. She was a tidy tramp of 5,000 tons odd, and Captain Malakovich made no objection to turning over the necessary cabins for our use. He expressed himself feelingly as glad to help any one who was trying to diddle the Turkish government, and he served us with a loyalty that earned him a considerable additional honorarium upon our arrival in Southampton.

"I'll enter your stuff on my manifests after we clear the port," he said frankly. "I don't care whether I ever come back here. As to Aleikouan—" the Circassian—"Wasso Mikali can send her to Salonika when he receives word that I have landed you gentlemen. I'll trade with the Greeks after this. I'm through with the Turks."

The transfer of the treasure occupied a week, for we could only work at night, carrying the heavy boxes down the drain and utilizing the limited stowage-room of the *Curlaw*. We set Watkins aboard the *Slava* to watch the boxes, and the rest of us either mounted guard on our prisoners or else made more boxes and packed. It was a

hectic time. The only real excitement that marked it, however, was a visit we received from two of Tokalji's men from the camp of the tribe in the Forest of Belgrade. Kara took care of them, sending them back with imaginary instructions from her father.

The last day, after the treasure boxes, now duly stenciled "Antiques, Statuary, Chgs. Pd., With Care," were stowed away in a secret compartment of the *Slava's* hold, we all found time to go to the British Embassy to see Hugh and Betty married. Kara, strangely subdued in a costume furnished by Betty, hung to Nikka's arm and watched the ceremony with amazement.

"Do the Franks have to do all that to be married?" she commented. "I am more than ever glad I am a Tzigane."

"What are you going to do with her, Nikka?" asked Betty. "Send her to school? Or let me look after her? I'd love to."

Nikka laughed.

"You wouldn't very long. No, I'm not going to curb my wild hawk so drastically. She shall taste of civilization sip by sip, until it savors sweetly on her tongue."

"And you?" cried Hugh. "Aren't you coming with us?"

"No. I must tame her. And in taming her I shall indulge the craving that has grown in me to sample again the joys of the open road that I have not known since I was a lad. We are going to wander, Kara and I. We will go up into the Rhodopes with Wasso Mikali for a while, and then we will take the Tzigane's Trail through the Balkans and over the Danube and the Carpathians, on, on, wherever we choose."

So, when the *Slava* steamed out of the Golden Horn that afternoon, Hugh and Betty, Vernon King, Watkins and I waved good-by to our comrade. Nikka and Kara stood on the pier-end as long as we could see them; and after they had dwindled out of sight we turned our gaze

on the matchless skyline of Stamboul, with its lofty domes and slender minarets and close-packed buildings tumbling down the hillsides to the great cordon of the old Byzantine sea-wall.

And on the very edge of the wall was poised the squat bulk of Tokalji's weird establishment. We could see it clearly, the fine lines of the House of the Married, the plummy tip of a cedar waving from its mysterious hidden courtyard, and the L-shaped mass of the bachelor's quarters opposite. They bulked smaller at this distance than when seen from the bobbing cockpit of the *Curlew*. Already it began to seem difficult to believe that within their walls we had witnessed so much of tragedy and devotion.

"See, there is the mouth of the drain!" exclaimed Betty, beside Hugh.

"D'you recall, Jack, how surprised we were when Watty popped out of it?" chuckled Hugh.

"Some day I really must return and follow that up," said King thoughtfully. "Archæologically speaking, it was quite the most important discovery that we made."

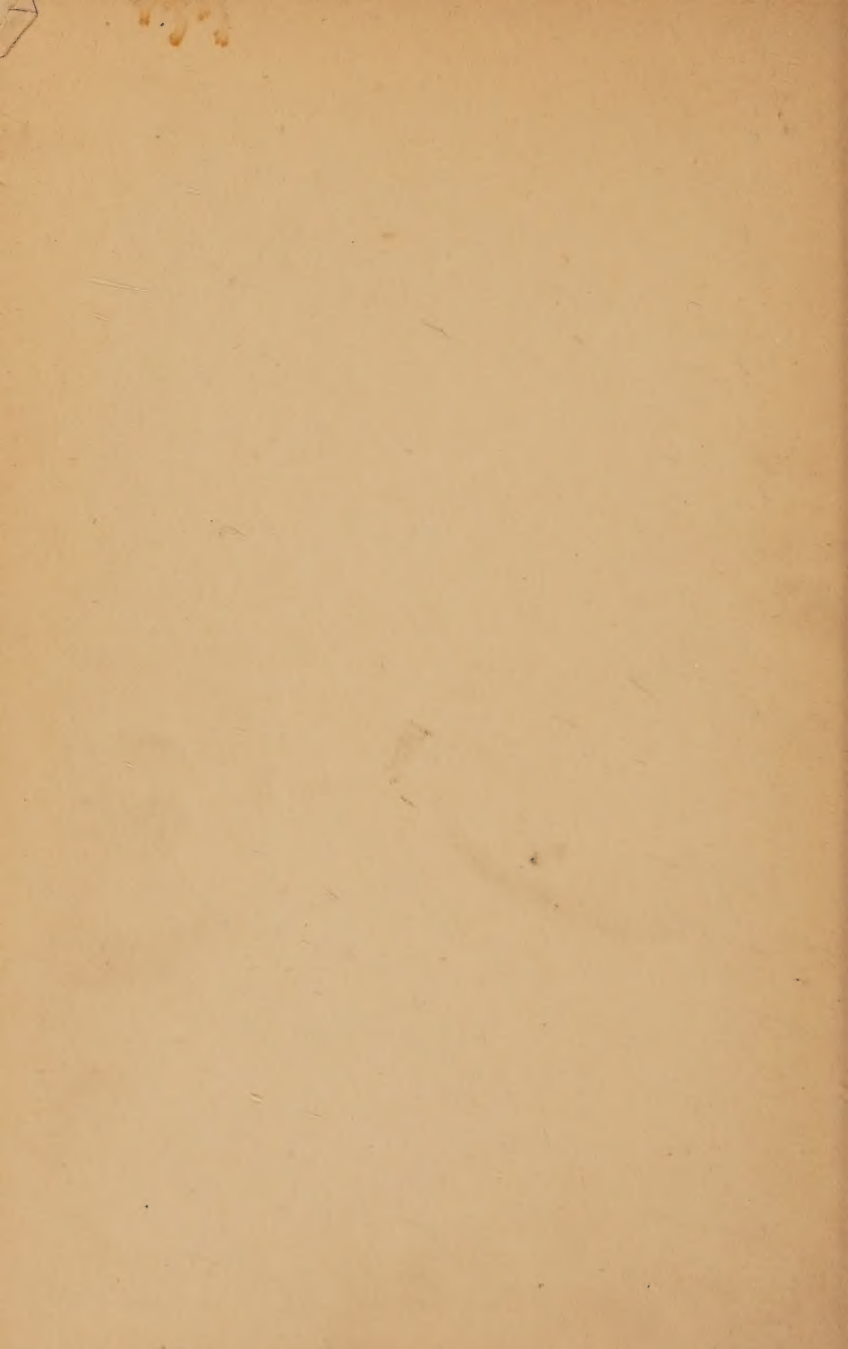
Watkins shook his head sorrowfully.

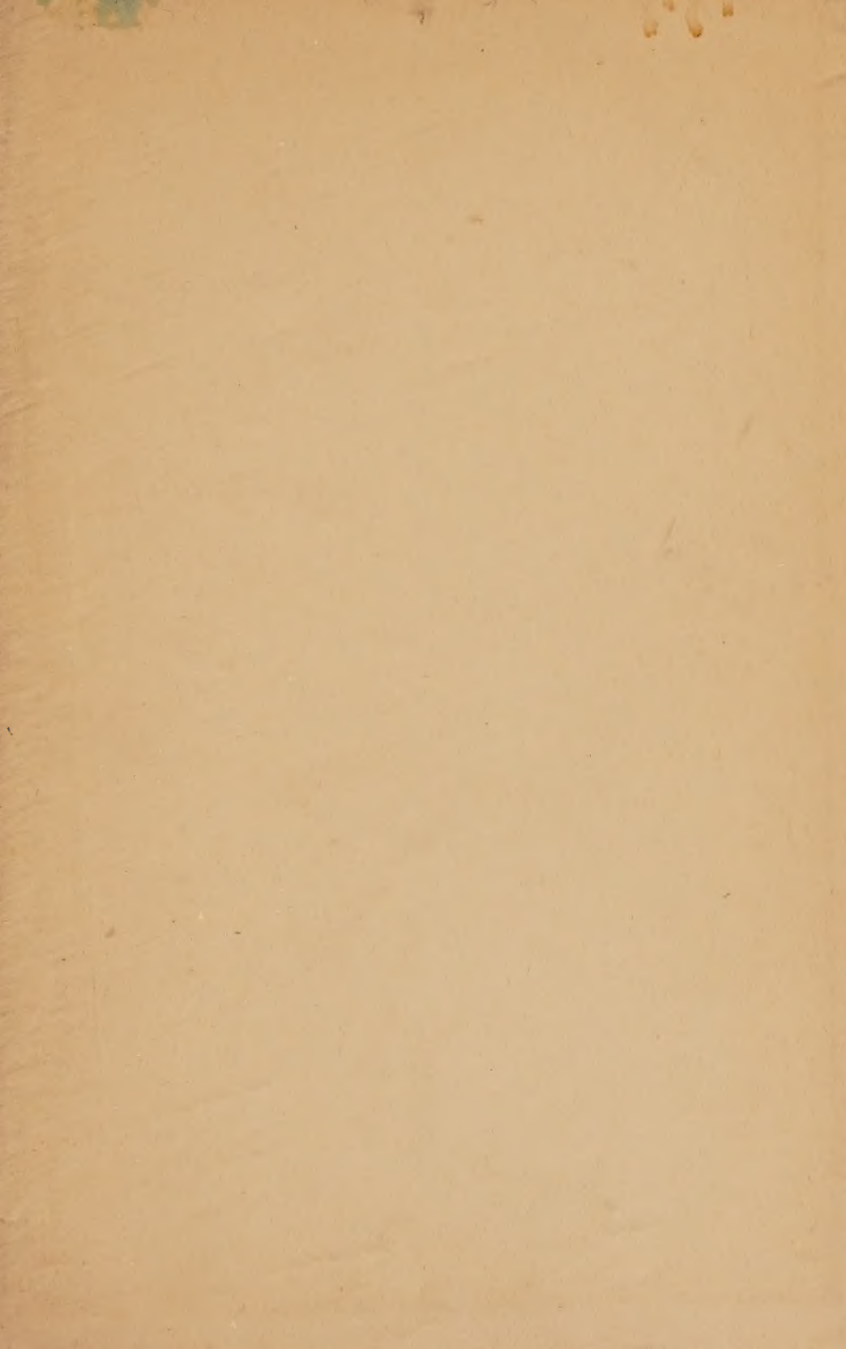
"I've been thinking, Mister Jack, sir," he said. "They'll never believe this story in the Servants' 'All, 'Awkins and Mrs. Prouty and Burbadge and the rest. They'll laugh at me or arsk 'is ludship to 'ave the County Council commit me for lunacy."

"They'd believe you if you accepted your share of the treasure," I told him.

"Per'aps," he admitted. "But what good would it do me, sir? I've no call for it, what with me valeting and all, and in the end Lloyd George would get it, 'im and the hincome-tax collector. They will any'ow, sir! By crickey, Mister Jack, I 'adn't thought of that!"

And for the first and only time in the course of our acquaintance Watkins indulged in a broad grin.





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